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*Confronting*

# CONFRONTING THE BIBLE

A Resource and Discussion Book for Youth

Walter Brueggemann



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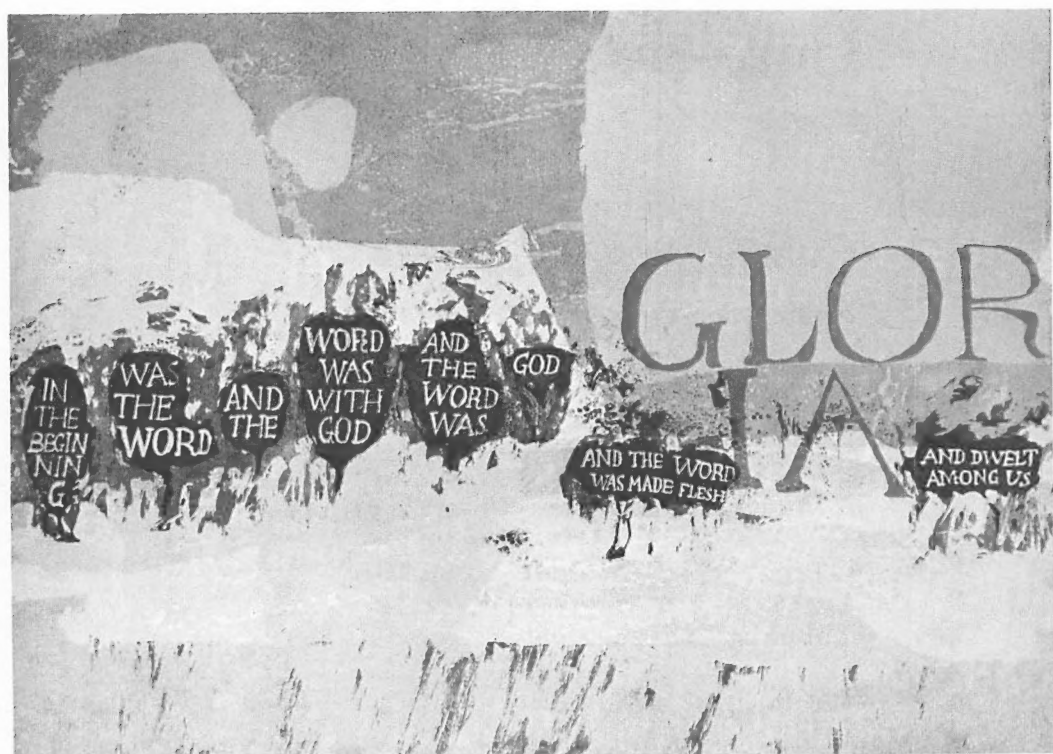
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# 1

## All the Fuss About an Old Book

Millions of people around the world have Bibles in their homes. Thousands of preachers uphold the Bible as the highest authority for human life. In thousands of churches children and young people study the Bible as a basic textbook of religious life. Every year the Bible tops the best-seller lists, and the total number of copies now in existence far exceeds any other book ever printed.

Why? Why all this fuss about an ancient book? Why do we teach the Bible to children even before they are able to read? Why do people on their deathbeds ask for the Bible to be read to them? Why do all kinds of people with all kinds of needs read and study the Bible, believe in it, and depend upon it?

In this course of study the author hopes to help you discover the answers to these questions and also to discover that the Bible can be of real help to *you* in your daily living. In that connection it should be made clear that this little book is not the *course*; and it is not a book about the Bible. Moreover, *reading* the book is not enough. This book is merely a guide by which you and your group may engage in an authentic experience of Bible study over a period of several weeks. It is not intended to be read in the class sessions; the various chapters should be assigned and read in advance.

This is really a workshop course, and ideally the sessions should be two hours in length so that the group will have adequate time for involvement in the real work of Bible study. This book suggests definite methods of study, but is purposely open-ended; you will be encouraged to draw your own conclusions and make your own ap-

plications as a result of your study. You will not be asked to memorize long passages of the Bible or long lists of facts about it; it is more important for you to come into direct confrontation with the Bible, to come to know it and to feel comfortable and at home in using it.

If you are to attain this goal you will need to have at least a few of the basic reference books suggested in each chapter of the course, and to learn how to use them effectively. (See page 73 for complete list.) But be careful not to let these resources come between you and the Bible. Use them as tools, not as crutches. No book is an absolute and final authority. Study the findings of various scholars, compare them, and then discuss them in your class sessions. This takes time, but it is the only way to make the Bible your own.

This study is designed to be used for eight sessions corresponding to the eight chapters of the book. If you have opportunity for more sessions chapter 3 might well be divided to cover two sessions, for it contains much difficult and important material; and any of the chapters might be used for more than one session simply by selecting one of the additional scripture passages suggested and studying it according to the method outlined in the chapter. If you should not have time enough for eight sessions you could omit the study of chapter 5 or combine it with your study of chapter 4.

As you engage in this study it will be absolutely essential to realize that the faith of the Bible is the faith of the church—the community of faith in which you are personally involved. It will be helpful therefore, whenever possible, to have adult church members share in this study experience.

The first half of the book is concerned with the *disciplines of scholarship* which are essential to an understanding of scripture. The second half is concerned with the *poetic possibilities* for involvement in the faith of the Bible. Taken as a whole, it should help young church members to take the Bible seriously as well as to interpret it intelligently.

## Taking It Seriously

### 1. Remembering Something Important

Many people fail to benefit from use of the Bible because they think it is something it is not. So what is it? *The Bible is a shared memory of events that were important to our fathers.*

It is a *memory*, something out of past experience that seemed important enough to pass along from generation to generation. A memory is a mysterious thing. It is fluid and alive. When we remember an event the memory may change on us so that we see it somewhat differently each time we recall it. Memory is so personal and subjective that we cannot treat it with the coldness and fixity of a scientific formula.

Now the Bible is much more like a poetic story than a mathematical formula. In math the formula always means the same thing, but each time we read or hear a poem or story we must decide anew what it is about and what it means to us. And what we decide will be colored by the mood we are in, the experiences of recent days, and the circumstances in which we find ourselves at the moment. So with our memories. We recall an event in one way today, but another time in another mood under other conditions we will remember different aspects of it.

Second, this memory is *shared*. No single person created the Bible, and no single person can understand it in isolation. In order to read this Book intelligently a person almost has to belong to a community (the church) that is concerned about the Book. To study the Bible means to share it with other people who also care about it. Much of the work of this course will involve thinking and talking about the Bible together, talking honestly, purposefully, and with discipline. This process of sharing what is important to us opens up meanings that one might never discover alone, and it also helps to avoid the possibility that a lone student may completely misunderstand any passage of scripture, even twisting it to mean what he wants it to mean.

Third, this Book has come *out of the life of our fathers*. Obviously this does not refer to our own parents, but to our ancestors in the faith. A father is not just one whose blood and name we have, but one who nurtures us to live, who teaches us what is good and true, one to whom we belong in spite of our weakness and failure. The men and women of the Bible are our ancestors in this way. How we live our lives will be partly determined by how we see ourselves in relation to our spiritual ancestors.

Fourth, this memory shared by the fathers is *about things important*. The important dimensions of life are concerned with meaning, with life and death, with the things we must fear and the persons we may trust, with relationships broken and restored,

with the problems of guilt and how we may be forgiven, with the realization that we doubt so much, yet want so much to know, and with the desire to live useful lives when so much seems nonsense. The Bible is the story of how our God has come at decisive moments and acted to make things different. As we learn about the deeds and ways of God in the past, we shall learn something of how we can relate to him now, how he works among us even today, and how we may serve him honestly and trust him fully.

This description of the Bible excludes many things. It prohibits us from wanting the Book to be a science book from which we can learn about the "how" of natural processes. It is not a book of morals that prescribes specific rules about everything we should do. It is not a book of advice that we can use for problem solving. It is rather a story about men and women who found life meaningful because of the presence and action of God in their lives.

## 2. Responding to Its Claim upon Us

Each of us has many forces and persons that guide our lives and to which we respond in obedience. These include the laws of our land, the customs of our social group, the traditions of our families, the prejudices of our class, the values of our parents, the fads of our friends. We respond in these certain ways because all these things matter to us.

As we reflect upon the goals we have and the authorities we respect, we must ask, In the midst of all of these what place does the Bible have? How important is this memory to us when we really make decisions?

The Christian church has always insisted that the Bible is an important authority in our lives. But this insistence has been a problem for many people in the church. Some have said it had great authority for them and then have lived as though it did not matter. Some have thought it a book about right and wrong and have used it to hit other people over the head for not living up to it. Some have wanted it to be an answer book for all sorts of questions, and when it didn't come out that way they have given it up entirely.

The Bible is not a book of rules, but a story. When we read this kind of story we do not evaluate it as though it were a scientific report. Rather we ask, "*Is it for real?*" Does it make sense? Does it speak honestly and without deception about the hurts we feel and the wrongs we see in daily living? If it is authentic in this way, then

it has a claim upon us and we must give it careful consideration. But what kind of claim does it have on us, and what do we do about it?

We treat the Bible as an authority when we respond to it by letting it influence our attitudes and actions, just as we honor our parents by letting their ideals and attitudes become a part of our lives and influence all that we do.

For example, when a young person has to make a decision about dating relationships, he cannot find in the Bible a rule that says, "Thou shalt not stay out late," or "Thou shalt not pet," but by long nurture in the Bible he has become a person who is considerate in all his relationships and respects both himself and other persons.

In accepting the authority of scripture we have to decide, "Will we live our lives out in the faith that ours is the kind of world the Bible says it is—a world in which every person is loved by an active God—that we are whole, free, and responsible persons, and that God has a good purpose for his whole world?"

To accept the Bible as *our* story means that we will let it influence our lives, guide us in crucial decisions, change our minds about some things, and define the purpose for which we live. It means also that we will commit ourselves to the community of other people (the church) who have let their lives be changed by it and who therefore understand it in a way that no outside, objective observer ever could.

### 3. Using It as a Help, Not an Escape

The Bible can be a great help, but we must be clear on what it can *not* do as well as what it can do. Many people think that if we decide for the Bible, life will be simple and decisions will be obvious. The Bible is not that kind of easy escape from the business of living. We will always have to make ambiguous decisions, and face their consequences. No amount of Bible reading is going to take us off that hook.

But it can do some things for us. First, the Bible can set each crisis in a *perspective* so we can understand it for what it is. For example, consider the racial demonstrations and violence of recent years. Without the Bible this may appear to be simply the struggle between the segregationists, who want to monopolize power and property, and the integrationists, who want to get their share. But

the Bible suggests it is more than this. In such conflict situations it sees God at work to bring about justice. And it helps us to see that his people, the church, must be involved wherever justice is at stake, and that we must therefore take this conflict seriously as our own conflict. The Bible makes all the difference.

Second, the Bible provides a *resource* for day-to-day relations with persons in the crisis of being human. Most of our anxieties about life are derived from the uncertainty we have about whether we will be accepted by others. If we know we are loved, then we are free to do what we know is good and true. If we think we are not loved, then we are likely to act out of fear, resentment, and anger. Each of us spends his life trying to become a mature person, one who is free to be who he wants to be. Here the Bible can be a valuable resource because on almost every page it assures us that God loves us and sustains us and gives us the freedom and courage to live as we know we ought, without fear or resentment.

Third, the Bible shows us the *destiny*, goal, or purpose of our life. From beginning to end the Bible is clear that God has a purpose for our life, that he has a definite goal and works ceaselessly with us to attain it. No longer are we busy with a lot of petty goals that change from day to day, but now we become persons dedicated to God's single purpose for our lives.

## Interpreting It Intelligently

It is not enough that we take the Bible seriously, that we accept it, and try to base our lives on it. We need not only to accept the Bible but also to *understand* it, to probe into it for ourselves and find its word to us, a word that it has never spoken in exactly the same way to anyone else before. We need to ask questions and discuss them with other Christians. (See questions at end of each chapter of this book.)

In a society where people know how to think and study and decide for themselves, it is very important that people in the church be trained and encouraged to think through the faith, to make independent judgments that are also intelligent. This is one of the reasons for confirmation education, to help people who want to learn of the faith, to become thinking, mature, responsible persons of faith. Applied to the Bible, this means that it is not enough to know something about the Bible, nor to be able to recite memorized

verses, nor to have a head full of facts. It is more important that persons be able to approach the Bible knowingly with the right tools and skills.

### 1. Discovering Its Validity

We have most often seen the Bible in a black cover and we may have gotten the impression that it is old-fashioned and not very important. And this idea may have been supported by the notion that only ministers and older people seemed to bother with it. Well, the Bible is very old. Its oldest parts probably were written about 3000 years ago, and even the most recent parts are at least 1800 years old. In terms of the history of our nation, or the French monarchy, or the government of England, or any of the familiar landmarks of human history, that is very old.

Moreover, the Bible is written in languages (Hebrew, Aramaic, and Greek) that are quite foreign to us. Because words change it is often very difficult to determine what the original writer really meant, let alone catch all the shades of meaning that are implied but not expressed in the written text.

The language and the culture of Bible people are those of the Near East. In the Western heritage of which we are all a part we tend to stress ideas that are logical and reasonable and we find it difficult really to get the feel of poetry. But the Bible comes from a different culture in which people do not reason so much as feel, do not dispute so much as affirm, do not argue so much as pray. (There are, of course, exceptions, such as the Pharisees and Paul in the New Testament, but even these reflect the Near Eastern culture.) Most of the Bible is written in the mood and the mentality of the poet, who believes not so much in the singleness of truth as in the meaningfulness of events. It is very difficult for us to understand and interpret this kind of writing.

Then why have we kept this old Book, and why do we study it so carefully? Is it kept around because people in the church have a kind of nostalgia for this best-seller, or because they believe that having a Bible in the house will bring them good luck? No, we have kept it because our study of it has taught us that it is valid, that it deals authentically with life as we must live it, and speaks relevantly to the real problems and questions we all have. Our study of the Bible is based on the conviction of its profound authenticity, which we want to understand and build into our lives.

## 2. Using Skills and Tools

We suggest that the Bible is hard to get at, but it's worth the effort. Many people in the church think they can just pick it up and read it. Well, they can, but they probably will not understand much of what is really being said. For a long time many Christians have just bungled through with the Bible, coming at it in a very haphazard way, and assuming that in even casual reading they could find a message that was pertinent and nice to hear about.

In this casual approach we did not reckon with the remoteness of the Bible, the fact that it uses words and ideas we no longer understand. It speaks of "anointing" and "creating," ideas that are really foreign to us. It speaks of God at war (Exodus 15:1-3) and man ascending to heaven (2 Kings 2:11), which seem very peculiar to us. It has a notion of the physical universe that science has shown to be false both in general outline and in detail.

If we are going to be intelligent and serious in our Bible reading we must use disciplined methods and scholarly skills as we do in any learning. Anyone who wants to study calculus must know both his numbers and the way to use a slide rule. Anyone who is serious about physics must begin to learn something about a reactor as well as the basics of mathematics. Anyone who wants to succeed in baseball must learn the fundamentals of bunting and sliding and should have a good glove. In the church we have often assumed that there are no such requirements for Bible students. But certain skills and tools are indispensable for anyone who intends to take the Bible both seriously and intelligently.

One of the required skills is knowing a useful procedure. What do you do first when you want to study a Bible text? What do you look for? What preliminary things must you know? We will suggest in what follows that studying a text is not a hit-or-miss matter, but that certain clues and hints can give structure and clear focus to our study.

The tools we must acquire include: (a) *maps* that show the location of events and their historical and geographical setting, (b) *dictionaries* that explain the meanings of many strange words that we must know about if we are going to make sense out of any Bible passage, (c) *concordances* that list all the places in the Bible where a given word is used, (d) various Bible *translations* that show us how other persons of faith have translated the original languages



to make sense out of them, and (e) *commentaries* that give us the best thinking the experts have done on significant Bible passages. As we learn about these tools it is important to remember that they are tools and not crutches. They can help us only if we use them as keys to serious, personal engagement with the Book. All these resources should be available at every session of this course.

### 3. Applying the Bible to Life

Every person has a burden on his heart; every man, woman, and child must make decisions and live through temptations. Reading the Bible will not relieve us of these. But we share the conviction that our crises can become meaningful and our situations bearable when they are touched with the faith and illumination of the Bible. When we learn that this Book is *our* Book and this history is history that has happened to *us*, we will take it seriously, honestly, and intelligently.

Important changes can happen in your life. God has come into our world to change things. Many persons have found him as they faced the Bible honestly.

Our study may at times be difficult and frustrating, but if lives can be changed we will study with expectation and discipline.

### For Thought and Discussion

Give some time to individual thinking about the questions below, and then discuss them with the whole group.

What are the things in my past that I remember most vividly? How do they affect my life? What memories does my father have that are important to me?

What loyalties are important to me? What factors play a significant role in the decisions I make? Do I really consider the values of my parents? of my friends? of my church? How could the Bible make a difference?

How do I feel about the Bible? Is it really important? Is it old and irrelevant? What should I expect from it? What does it demand of me?

## 2

# Making Confusion Manageable

The Bible was not written in tiny bits and pieces, though we often study it that way in the church. Rather, it was composed in larger units and needs to be studied that way. Unfortunately, when we try to read several chapters or a whole book at one sitting, either it seems all to be making the same point, so that we wish the writer had summarized, or it seems such a mishmash of disconnected detail that we only get confused and quit reading. What can we do to avoid these problems?

The first thing we need to learn to do with any passage of scripture is to reduce the seeming confusion to manageable size, to find some control by which the many parts may be held together and seen in their proper relationships. One of the best ways of doing this is to *examine the historical and literary context* of the whole passage. That is, we need to ask: What was this piece of material all about in the mind of the writer? Why did he write it? What did he intend? What primary point was he trying to make? The answers to these questions will reveal the overall character of the passage, and then we can be more intelligent about the meaning of specific verses within it. But the *general understanding must come before the specific look*.

In order to become familiar with this approach, let's apply it to the study of the long passage about Joseph in Genesis 37, 39-48, 50. (Chapters 38 and 49 are not about Joseph.) Open your Bibles to this passage and follow the process outlined in the next few pages. Remember, first we want to get a bird's-eye view.

## 1. Seeing the Whole Picture

Our study of any Bible passage can best be described as a process of asking the right questions and finding the answers. And our first questions concern the nature of the basic structure of the text.

a. *What holds the text together as a unit?* This first question can best be answered by a quick reading of the whole passage in order to get an overall impression. Although many things happen in the story, we soon discover that the unifying factor is the person of Joseph. This is an account of the crises Joseph faced and what happened to him as a result.

b. But this does not help us much, for we still have a very long passage that is all about Joseph, and it still seems a general mish-mash. So the second question we may ask is, "*Can this long passage be subdivided into sections that can be handled more easily?*" In a way, this is like seeking an outline. Here we may do two things:

First, read with a pencil (don't be afraid to mark your Bible) and mark the transitions and turning points that divide scenes or episodes. These will include characteristic devices for storytelling such as the following phrases.

"Now Joseph had a dream, . . ." (37:5)

"Now Joseph was taken down to Egypt, . . ." (39:1)

"Now Joseph was handsome and good-looking." (39:6b)

"Some time after this, . . ." (40:1)

"So Joseph went in and told Pharaoh, . . ." (47:1)

Also mark the places where other persons are mentioned in relation to the central character, such as the following.

"The butler of the king of Egypt and his baker . . ." (40:1)

"Then Pharaoh sent and called Joseph, . . ." (41:14)

"When Joseph saw Benjamin with them, . . ." (43:16)

"When Judah and his brothers came . . ." (44:14)

Soon a pattern begins to emerge and we see that the story revolves around several centers: (1) Joseph's wisdom and skill in administration, (2) Joseph and his dealings with Pharaoh, (3) Joseph and his relation to his father and brothers, (4) Joseph, the man with trouble and a way out. If you have done the work carefully, your Bible should now be marked so that you can group most of the sections of the unit under one or another of those categories. (Note: No two persons will agree in detail, but that does not mean one is more correct than another.)



*Egyptian life at the time of Joseph: scribes record the harvest.*

Second, *after* (not *before*) you have worked through the text individually, have made generalizations about the nature of the material, and have outlined it, then you might compare your work with that of others in the group. Finally you will want to see what the scholars have to say. Among the many good scholarly resources for work on the Joseph narrative are the following.

Anderson, Bernhard W., *Understanding the Old Testament*, pp. 24–26.

*Peake's Commentary on the Bible*, pp. 200ff.

C. A. Simpson, article on "Genesis," in *The Interpreter's Bible*, vol. 1, p. 439.

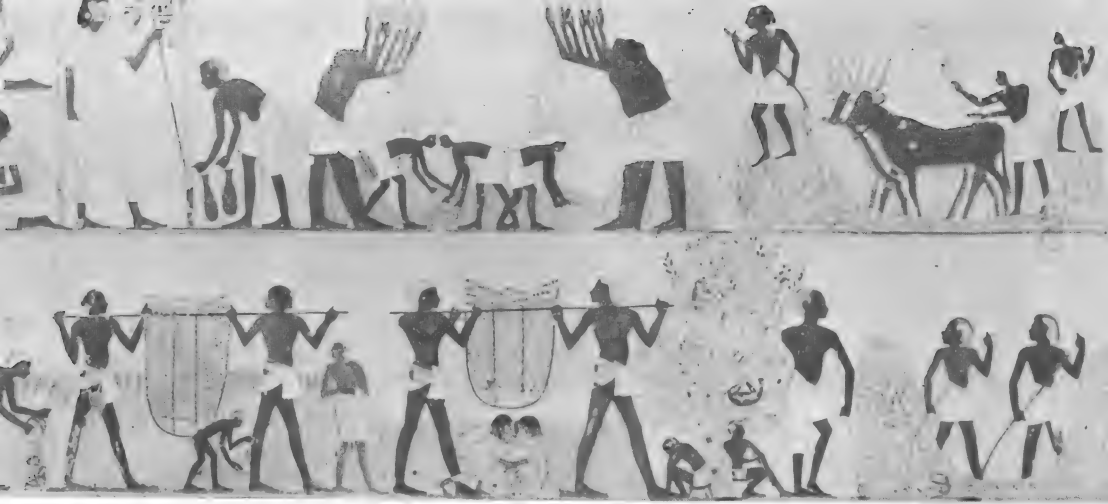
O. S. Wintermute, article on "Joseph Son of Jacob," in *The Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible*, vol. E–J, pp. 981ff.

c. Because the materials in the Bible are not just interesting materials, but are also regarded as sacred scripture, the third question we may now ask of the material is: "Given the fact that Joseph is the main character (which gives unity to the material), *where in this material does the writer see God as playing a significant role?*" We can always learn much about the meaning of a biblical text by discovering just how God's action is understood and portrayed.

In this unit of material the following are some of the important places where God is described as acting, or at least influencing events. Look them up and study them in their contexts.

"The LORD was with Joseph, . . ." (39:2, 23)

"The blessing of the LORD was upon all that he had, . . ." (39:5)



"God has shown to Pharaoh what he is about to do." (41:28)

"God will shortly bring it to pass." (41:32)

"God has made me forget all my hardship and all my father's house." (41:51)

"What is this that God has done to us?" (42:28)

"God sent me before you to preserve life." (45:5-7)

"I will go down with you to Egypt, . . ." (46:2ff.)

"You meant evil against me; but God meant it for good, . . ." (50:20)

Each of these references should be clearly marked in your Bible so that you can see it quickly.

Now having asked these three questions about (1) main theme, (2) division into episodes, and (3) the presence and action of God, we know some important things about the narrative. We know that its general content concerns a man, Joseph, who gets into a variety of tough situations, but that he is a man of great wisdom and faith and in every situation trusts God. So we may generalize on this data to say that the story is about one who has "ups and downs" but has faith that God is constant and reliable.

## 2. Finding Its Original Meaning

But this general theological statement needs to be given clearer meaning by linking the story to the time when it was written, in order to discover what it meant then. To be sure, we cannot be certain about this, but helpful evidence may be gathered.



*Chariot of Tutankhamen, similar to the one Joseph rode in after his induction into office.*

a. We may begin by asking, “*What kind of material is it?*” There are all kinds of literature in the Bible, but we must learn to expect from each kind only what it can give. In the case of the Joseph account, a reading of it suggests that we have a *short story* much like those in popular magazines today. They are told mostly for entertainment and they are generally light, breezy, and enjoyable, but sometimes they pack a punch.

b. Next we can ask, “*When was the story written?*” Here the evidence is often very obscure and complex and we have to rely upon the work of scholars. Many of their conclusions are conjectural, but they offer the best working hypotheses we have.

In the case of the Joseph story, most scholars are agreed that this material was put into written form by the tenth century B.C., about the time of David and Solomon, though it is based on events that happened several centuries earlier. According to accounts in the books of Samuel, Kings, and Chronicles, this was a time when such strong and brave men were tempted to think they had the resources and power to “make it” alone. But the Joseph story seems to have been written to suggest that amidst all the ups and downs of life men really need a God who can be trusted.

c. If it is a story for entertainment and instruction, and if it can only be dated very generally, then we must ask: “Did the story probably happen as it says it happened? *Is it really historical?*” We can say only that it is historical in the sense that it is rooted in the culture of its time. It is informed by the habits and customs of its

own period. The story accurately reflects Egyptian culture. (1) The names are Egyptian. (2) Dream interpretation was important in ancient Egypt. (3) Joseph's title was typical for Egyptian rulers. (4) The birthday of Pharaoh was indeed celebrated. (5) The activity of magicians was well known in Egypt. (6) The pattern of seven-year famines was common in ancient Egypt. (7) The practice of embalming the dead (50:2, 26) was highly developed there. Thus we are sure that the author was familiar with the world of Joseph. But this does not prove that the story is history. (See *Peake's Commentary on the Bible*, pp. 200f., and Anderson's *Understanding the Old Testament*, pp. 24–26.)

So we must say, it is not history in the sense that it records events as they really happened, as a newspaper account does. It is rather a *story about faith*. As a story, it tells something that happened; but as faith, it is imaginative and creative. This part of the Bible, like most other parts, is really to *tell the faith*, that is, to convince others and invite them to share in it. It is in a general way faithful to the facts. But the story is told with excitement and great feeling. It is told by people who cared and were involved. And whenever we tell stories which excite and involve us, we are creative and imaginative. We may exaggerate, not to mislead people, but because we very much want them to understand. The Bible is like that.

d. After we have asked the literary question about the kind of story it is, and the historical question about whether it really happened (both questions are important, though sometimes they are not easily answered), then we are prepared to ask finally: "*What faith is being affirmed here?*" To answer this, read the entire story again and mark the places that seem to be "loaded" with faith. The ones that seem most important are 45:4–7; 46:2–7; and 50:20–21. These declare that (1) God is really in charge of life, (2) you can trust him to keep his promises, and (3) you can know he is at work even when things go badly.

### 3. Hearing Its Message for Today

We have drawn a general conclusion that this story was written early in Israel's history in order to make the point that we are not alone in the world but there is a God who can be trusted.

Now we must ask what the text might mean to each of us today: "*What does the text say to me that can matter much?*" Is it possible

that there is a God like this who is present and helpful? Does he care about my “ups and downs”? If there is such a God, how can I know him? Where do I see him at work in my life? If he is there, in what ways does that change my life? And what if he is not? What if I must handle my “ups and downs” by myself?

This text really asks you a question: Is there a God that matters in your ups and downs? Is it important that the Bible says there is?

## **Principles of Bible Study**

As a result of our work thus far we have observed several principles that are important for understanding the Bible:

1. The Bible demands careful attention; it cannot be read quickly or lightly.
2. It is important to ask the right questions and not just play around with the text.
3. We need to underline passages and make notes in our Bibles as we read.
4. We need to consult helpful resources in other books.
5. Though questions of literature and history are often difficult, we must find answers to them if we are going to understand the Book on its own terms.
6. All study is useless unless we relate it to our own lives and to the problems of the society in which we live.

## **Trying the Tools**

Now that we have mastered basic principles and procedures, let's try them out on our own in a study of the book of Ruth. We might start out with the theme, “The Power of a Compelling Loyalty,” and follow carefully the same steps outlined above. A suggested time schedule is given at the end of this section.

1. Seeing the Whole Picture
  - a. Read it through to get an overall impression. What seems to be the unifying thread?
  - b. Can the story be subdivided for easier handling? What transitional marks can you identify?
  - c. Where do you see God working, or is he mentioned at all? Does his relation to the unifying thread make a difference? If so, in what way?



## 2. Finding Its Original Meaning

- a. What kind of material is this book? Is it a historical report? A story to entertain or to teach? What do the scholars say about this?
- b. When was the story written? Is the first verse really a clue?
- c. Is this account historical? Did it really happen? What kinds of evidence can be used to deal with this problem? How does it relate to David (4:18–22, Matthew 1:5–6)?
- d. What faith is being affirmed here? Does the great promise of 1:16–17 give some clues to the meaning of the story?

## 3. Hearing Its Message for Today

- a. What compels a person to have a loyalty like that of Ruth?
- b. What does it mean to relate to a community of people who have such concern for each other?
- c. What kind of loyalties control us? What things are worth leaving? What things are worth staying with?
- d. To what extent is growing up a matter of leaving?
- e. In what ways is the story of Ruth a story of maturity? Does her faith in God have anything to do with it?

This study of the book of Ruth might well be handled in a two-hour workshop in which you really do some work and not just sit and guess. Here is a possible time schedule.

For thirty minutes the group might work together, reading the story aloud and talking about first impressions. What seems to be going on? What special concerns does this raise for members of the group?

For forty-five minutes members of the group could work singly or in pairs to do the research necessary. Members may be assigned to various questions suggested, locating resource materials, spending time with the text itself, or taking care of special concerns which came up in the initial discussion.

The next thirty minutes may be used to share the results of the work time, during which each person has an opportunity to report. This may be done with chalkboard and hastily improvised posters as well as verbally.

The final fifteen minutes may be used to talk together about what this means to us, to relate it to our own individual and social problems and struggles.

Resources that will be helpful in this study of Ruth are the following.

- Anderson, Bernhard W., *Understanding the Old Testament*, pp. 451ff.
- Harvey, D., in *The Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible*, vol. R-Z, pp. 131ff.
- Smith, L. P., in *The Interpreter's Bible*, vol. 2, pp. 829ff.

## Continued Exploration

If you have time to experiment further with the method suggested, try it on one or two of the following books of the Bible.

1. *The Book of Esther*: "The Importance of Living for a Reason"  
Can this book have religious meaning even though it never mentions the name of God?
2. *The Gospel According to Mark*: "The Time Is NOW."  
Can we find a unity in this Gospel which the church usually works at bit by bit?
3. *The Epistle of James*: "Faith Lived Responsibly"  
How do all the little things we do relate to our faith in God?

## Further Exploration

When the group has worked through and tested the suggested procedure, you might well spend some time discussing some general questions about the method.

Does it matter what kind of literature we have in a text? Can one expect different things from different kinds of literature?

Does it hurt or help the authority of a biblical passage to say that it is a story used "to tell the faith"?

Do stories that have God at their center really focus on life as we have to live it, or do they seem lacking in reality?

In what ways do these stories seem remote from our lives? In what ways do they seem relevant for our lives?

# 3

## Tools for Details

We have learned how to study a long passage by organizing its various parts and discovering its main point. Now we shall turn our attention to the more intensive study of a brief text. Here again the study of the Bible can become most meaningful and interesting if we know how to proceed properly. We can understand a text more fully if we exercise *discipline* in our reading, and use the available *tools* intelligently.

One of the most essential tools for intelligent Bible study is an authoritative Bible commentary, which is a book or set of books containing the work of scholars describing historical, geographical, and social backgrounds of the various books of the Bible, interpreting their meaning, and suggesting their relevance for Christians today. Undoubtedly the most popular and easily available commentary now in print is *The Interpreter's Bible*, and it will be to your advantage to have access to it all the way through this course.

### Trying the Tools of Bible Study

For our experimental study in this session we shall choose the brief text of Isaiah 52:7-10, using a pattern similar to the one developed in the previous session, but going into greater detail and actually using the resources suggested. Assuming that every member of the class has read this entire chapter before the session, the class time (two hours if at all possible) might best be used as a work session, with members assigned individually or in teams to first

read the Isaiah passage and decide what it is all about, and then actually to look up and study the reference material pointed out in the following pages. If possible, let each person have a few minutes with each of the reference books so that he may become familiar with every step in the process. Because of the large blocks of material that are to be read in *The Interpreter's Bible* there will not be time for everyone to use it now, so it may be necessary to arrange an extra session for this purpose, or even to provide two or three periods during the week when a few at a time may drop in at the church library or the minister's study and get familiar with this very important resource.

\* \* \*

*The Interpreter's Bible* is really a twelve-volume guide to the whole Bible. The first half of volume 1 consists of general articles about the Bible and a special section on the Old Testament. Volumes 1 to 6 contain thorough studies of every book in the Old Testament. Volume 7 begins with general articles on the New Testament and the balance of the set is devoted to detailed studies of all the New Testament books. Volume 12 contains a very helpful index to the whole set.

Its thoroughness of treatment is evident in the fact that almost four hundred pages of volume 1 are devoted to discussion of Genesis alone! In order to locate the article about any desired book of the Bible, merely look for the name on the spines of the volumes; the books are arranged in the same order as in the Bible. Note the table of contents in the front of each volume. Headings at the top of each page give the chapter and verses discussed on that page, so no time is lost in looking up any passage of scripture.

The introduction to the article on each book gives all pertinent information about the author, date, historical and geographical background, and contemporary events, customs, beliefs, and political situations. On the first page of the introduction is a detailed outline of the introduction itself, showing every subject that is treated. The introduction also includes a detailed outline of the Bible book, which is a great help in understanding the main themes and seeing the relation of all its parts.

In the sections discussing the actual scripture passages each page is divided into three parts horizontally. In the top part on the left page are reproduced the King James Version of the verses discussed on that page, and on the right page are the same verses from the Revised Standard Version, so the two may be easily compared. In the middle part is the exegesis of those verses—a detailed explanation and interpretation of the meanings of words and phrases and of the significance of ideas in the light of events and conditions at the time of writing. In the bottom part is the exposition of the same verses—suggestions about the relevance of the ideas for Christians today.

\* \* \*

## 1. Seeing the Whole Picture

a. First we want to get an overview of the larger unit of material in which these four verses (Isaiah 52:7–10) are found, according to the method used in chapter 2. We look first in the introduction of the article on Isaiah in *The Interpreter's Bible*, volume 5 on page 151. There we find that the book of Isaiah is really two separate books written in different periods, and that our text (52:7–10) falls in the second part, chapters 40–66.

So we turn in the introduction to the second part beginning on page 381. There we find the outline of the introduction. Note that the phrasing of the points in this outline corresponds exactly to the headings in the text that follows. It is easy to skim the outline for points of special concern to us and then quickly find the discussion of those points in the article.

First it would be well to read the section headed "III. The Second Isaiah" beginning on page 384, in order to discover what was the prophet's chief concern in writing chapters 40–55. The latter part of the subsection "A. Unity" makes it clear that Isaiah was trying to convince the discouraged captive Israelites in Babylon that their God is the God of all the nations and that he will come to their aid by using even the Persian emperor Cyrus to accomplish his will.

b. Now we shall try to discover the original historical context of our passage. Turning back to the outline of *The Interpreter's Bible* introduction on page 381, we find under "III. Second Isaiah" the subsection "C. Historical Situation." Turning the pages we find this heading on page 393, and in the paragraphs following we learn that at the time of the writing of our text the Babylonian Empire had just fallen to the Persians under Cyrus who soon afterward announced a policy that would permit the captives in Babylon to return to their homeland.

If you do not have access to *The Interpreter's Bible* for this kind of study, or cannot spare as much time as that would require, you will find simpler and much briefer resources in *Understanding the Old Testament* by Bernhard Anderson. Chapter 13 gives excellent background for understanding our passage from Isaiah. This book along with the companion volume *Understanding the New Testament* by Kee, Young, and Froehlich skillfully interweave the record of the Bible itself with the results of historical and archaeo-

logical research to make Bible times come alive for modern readers, and to help them understand the literary and theological development of the whole Bible.

Another resource that is less expensive and less technical in style, but nevertheless accurate and helpful, is *The Layman's Bible Commentary* which is published in twenty-five small volumes. The only up-to-date one-volume Bible commentary is *Peake's Commentary on the Bible*, a completely new work under an old name. It is concise, but somewhat technical for laymen and students.

## 2. Sizing Up the Passage

a. Because a passage has its own integrity within the larger block of material, it is always important to determine exactly *where it begins and ends*. Of course we could find this in the commentaries, but it is also good to learn to do this for ourselves as we read. As we look for beginnings, we may expect to find some new expression of force, an imperative, a summons, a call, or an exclamation. In this passage (Isaiah 52:7-10) the beginning is not clearly marked, but it is there in the expression: "How beautiful are . . . !" (52:7) Moreover, the end of verse 6 is clearly a climax to one unit, and verse 7 must therefore be the beginning of the next.

The ending is often more easily spotted because it expresses the real point of the whole passage, and in many cases it will include a reference to God. If we hear the ending read aloud (it is always better to *hear* it), we are likely to get the impression that we could hardly add anything to it. In our passage the climax comes obviously in verse 10:

the ends of the earth shall see  
the salvation of our God.

b. After determining the extent of the passage (beginning and end), then we must ask, "*What kind of literary form is involved?*"

First we must take notice of the fact that this passage is poetry. At this point it would be helpful to read what James Muilenberg in *The Interpreter's Bible* has to say about Isaiah's poetry. See volume 5, page 382, and the section "Poetic Form, Structure, and Style" on page 386. Then turn to the detailed exegesis of our selected passage on pages 610-612. From this study we see that this passage may be understood in terms of two literary forms. The first of these (verses 7-8) is the proclamation of a herald when he arrived with news of the outcome of a battle. The passage portrays a runner (messenger)

coming and (in verse 7) delivering his message. This *messenger form* may be seen in a more natural context in 2 Samuel 18:24ff., which tells of a man running with news and the watchmen awaiting his coming. This form then tells us that (a) an important conflict has been taking place, and (b) the outcome of the conflict is about to be announced.

The second form that seems to be reflected here is that of a *coronation hymn* that was sung when a king was crowned. This is reflected in the phrase of verse 7, "Your God reigns." For other uses of this phrase see Psalms 93:1; 96:10; 99:1; one referring to a human king is 2 Kings 9:13. From the form, then, we might expect this passage to resemble an announcement of a new king.

Notice now how very much we have learned about the main theme of this passage without even considering the content.

c. Now that we know in general what to expect from the passage, we can look to see how the unit progresses in terms of *sequence and structure*. We can best do this with a piece of scratch paper or a chalkboard on which we can change and adapt our conclusions as we go along. This is an attempt to see how the poet develops his thought and brings the hearer to the climax that he intends. We can

*Samuel anoints David, Dura Europas synagogue, 236 A.D.*



make this analysis by paying attention to transitions and changes of all kinds, to patterns of repeated words, and to the position in which important words stand. Also, the places where God is mentioned will give us a clue to the structure.

In our chosen passage a quick glance gives us some handles for this analysis. After the original exclamation we notice the word "who" occurs five times, each time with an important object, and ending with a statement about God. Verse 8 begins with an imperative (Hark!), the mention of the agent (watchman), followed by three verbs (lift up, sing, and see) and ends with a mention of the Lord. Verse 9 again has an imperative (Break forth!), reference to Jerusalem, and another mention of the Lord. Verse 10 seems to be climactic, for it makes a vigorous statement about "The Lord" and his work of "salvation."

After noting these features, we may show the structure of this particular passage by means of the following diagram.

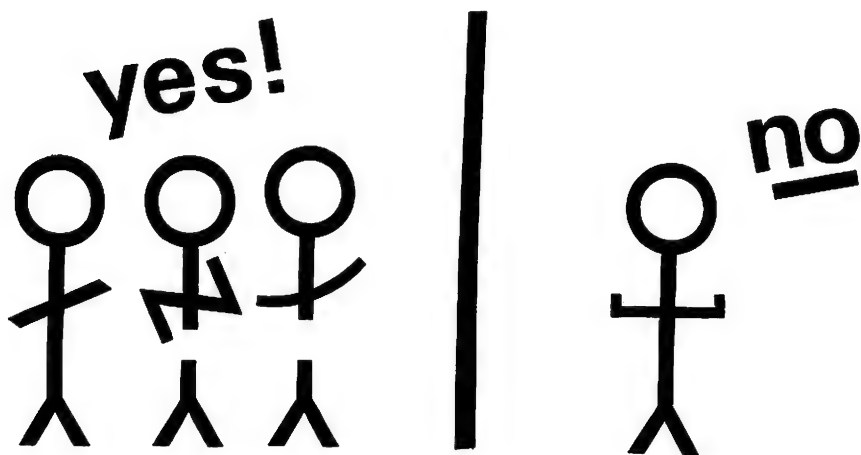
CLAIMS OF ATTENTION:	VERBS:	STATEMENTS ABOUT GOD:
How beautiful . . .	brings (good tidings) publishes (peace) brings (good tidings) publishes (salvation) says	Your God reigns
Hark . . .	lift up sing see	Return of the Lord
Break forth . . . The Lord . . .	bared (his holy arm) (ends of earth) shall see	has redeemed Jerusalem salvation of our God

This analysis of structure may now be correlated with the study of form above. When this movement toward the climax of verse 10 is noted from the structure, it supports our conclusions from form that the passage is something important in a mood of joy. The messenger returns (messenger form) with the news that God has won the battle and is still king (enthronement hymn). The announce-



ment that he is returning and has redeemed and saved, is an affirmation derived from the notice of victory.

d. At this point it might be well for us to try to draw on a chalkboard what we see as the central image or "picture" that this text gives us. The image may be a bit crude but it will give us a frame by which to hold all the details together.



The messenger hurries with the news, the watchmen on the wall wait, the people in the city rejoice. God has won the battle and is acknowledged as King.

This sketch, an attempt to catch the message of the passage in one glimpse, will be most useful if it is made very concrete and specific. If it is vague or abstract it will not be a very helpful handle for understanding.

### 3. Understanding the Words

Now we are prepared to move even closer to a specific understanding of the text, and here again we must learn to use the scholarly tools.

a. *The study of difficult words.* Obviously the passage cannot be understood unless we are clear about the meaning of each of the words and phrases. Two kinds of terms need investigation:

(1) Words that deal with *specifics*. This will include proper names with which we simply are not familiar. In our passage perhaps the only word in this category is Zion, found in verses 7 and 8. To determine what it means we should look at Bible dictionaries

which give the meanings of such terms, along with much information about almost every person, place, or thing mentioned in the Bible. *The Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible*, a four-volume set, is the most comprehensive, but several good one-volume Bible dictionaries are available and very helpful. *The Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible*, volume R-Z, page 959, tells us that Zion refers to the hill on which Jerusalem stands and also to any object of God's favor or love. Thus, a historical location comes to represent a theological notion—something that God loves.

(2) Words loaded with *theological meaning*. In addition to technical words and names, there are some words that contain a great deal of theological significance, often more than we realize in our casual use of them. These are the words of the faith vocabulary that we use all the time without being clear on their meaning. In our passage, for example, this would include such words as peace, good tidings, salvation, holy. Here again the dictionaries and encyclopedias will be useful. In *The Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible*, volume K-Q, page 704, we learn something of the religious dimensions of the word peace, namely, that it speaks of a relationship of mutuality and carries with it the notion of all kinds of blessings. This is helpful, but sometimes the dictionaries are too brief. More help may be found in theological wordbooks (see Resources on page 73).

From our study of the technical words and the loaded religious words, we can conclude about this passage that (a) the bringing of *salvation* is a joyous message that God has won a victory that will change our lives for the better, (b) that the message is for *Zion*, the place and people God especially loves, and (c) that when God bares his *holy* arm he is acting with great power. The passage is announcing a decisive change in the life of this community for whom God is at work, and is telling the people to be glad and trust in him.

b. In addition to these kinds of helps it is well to learn about the use of each key word in other places; this will help us understand the word as it is used here.

The tool that helps us find other uses of a word is called a *concordance*. It is something like a dictionary, and lists all words used in the Bible; but, in addition, following each word is a list of all verses containing that word. Thus, for example, in looking up "tidings" in a concordance we find that this word is used in (1) 2 Samuel 18:19-20 where it refers to a message of victory in war, (2)

in 1 Kings 1:42-43 where it is a message about who has won the struggle to be king, and (3) in 1 Chronicles 10:9 where again it is news of a victory in war. (In the RSV the word news is used instead of tidings in the latter two places.) By observing that the word is most often used in contexts of war and victory we conclude that it has that connotation here also, and that this passage concerns the good news that God has been engaged in battle and has won a decisive victory for the people (Zion) whom he loves.

c. As we work through a text like this we should also compare *several different translations* of the same text. It is important to remember that every translation in English is an attempt of some scholar or group of scholars to help us understand the real meaning of the original Hebrew, Aramaic, or Greek words. But we must remember that no translation can be considered the last word, and none is uniformly better than the others.

Thus, in our text the opening phrase "How beautiful . . . are the feet . . ." may cause us trouble because today we simply do not think of feet as especially beautiful. Is there a better way to translate this so that we can really understand it? Let us look at the translations of Ronald Knox and James Moffatt.

Welcome, welcome, on the mountain heights the messenger  
that cries, All is well! <sup>1</sup>

Look! 'tis the feet of a herald,  
hastening over the hills,  
with glad, good news,  
with tidings of relief.<sup>2</sup>

Now it is difficult to know which is the better translation, but in this case the renderings of Knox and Moffatt show clearly that the meaning of the word is not "beautiful" but "welcome." A people anxious about the battle eagerly welcome any messenger who brings news of victory.

Other translations of the Bible that will be useful to us are *The New English Bible* (only the New Testament has been published at this date), *The Bible: An American Translation* by Smith and Goodspeed, and *The New Testament in Modern English* by J. B. Phillips.

d. After we have done our best to interpret a passage in this

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<sup>1</sup> *The Old Testament*, translated by Ronald Knox. Sheed & Ward Inc.

<sup>2</sup> *The Bible—A New Translation* by James Moffatt. Harper & Brothers.

way, we should compare our results with those of professional scholars in the commentaries, and fill in any details we may have overlooked. Thus, for example, in *The Interpreter's Bible* (vol. 5, p. 611) James Muilenberg explains the meaning of the phrase "eye to eye" in verse 8 of our text. He says it means the people have a *clear view* of what God is doing. Then on page 612 he comments about the importance of singing as a way of expressing joy and gratitude in the world of the Bible.

About the use of commentaries: (1) They should be used as helps and not as crutches; we need to do our own work first. (2) They are written by human beings, and may therefore contain errors; we need to compare and evaluate them.

#### 4. Getting the Point

a. Now, having used the tools available to us, we should try to draw some conclusion about the meaning of our text. First, *What did the passage mean when it was first spoken?* For this text we can say: The prophet wanted to tell the people of Israel that God was still powerful and loving, and that he had just destroyed the Babylonian empire so that the Jews could go back home. The gospel (good news) is that because God is in charge the exile is over and the people are free to return to their homeland and begin the rebuilding of their nation.

b. After we have correctly understood the original intention of the text, we may now ask, *What can this mean for us today?* To get at this, we need to find the point of contact, to determine how our context is like that context, and whether this same "good news" still matters to us. You will find a helpful discussion of the relevance of Isaiah for modern days in *The Interpreter's Bible*, volume 5, pages 419–421.

Very often, the meaning for us may come in a series of questions such as: Is this God still in charge? Where have you been in exile? To what have you been a captive? to fears? prejudices? parents? car? And all of this drives us to even deeper questions: Does it make sense to believe in a God like this? Where has he been lately? What happens to a person who has faith? Does he have more power? more wisdom? more courage? more security? Are there signs of God's concern in your life? Are there signs of his neglect? What would it mean if you had faith of the kind that the prophet expresses in these verses?

## Trying the Tools on Other Texts

Hosea 2:16–20 is a good passage on which to experiment with the tools and resources which have been considered thus far. This study could be done in an extra session of the class, or individually between sessions.

1. Seeing the Whole Picture
  - a. Determine first the general theme of the whole book, Hosea 1–14. Consult the basic books, Anderson's *Understanding the Old Testament* and *The Interpreter's Bible*.
  - b. Set the passage in its own historical context. What was happening in the land when the prophet wrote this book? See the same resource books again.
2. Sizing Up the Passage
  - a. We have suggested Hosea 2:16–20. Read the passage together. Can you see reasons for considering these verses as the beginning and end of the passage?
  - b. What kind of literary form do we have here? What is the mood and tone of the passage?
  - c. How does the passage move toward its climax? Do you find clues in the places where the name of God occurs? Is there a shifting of themes and motifs? What is the most powerful idea stated?
  - d. As the passage is read aloud together, what is the picture that comes to mind? Would it make sense to draw a *wedding*? See chapters 1 and 3.
3. Understanding the Words
  - a. Study the difficult words: justice, mercy, faithfulness.
  - b. Use concordances to determine where else these same words are found. Check on such words as safety, beasts, birds, and creeping things. Doesn't this last make one think of the creation stories (Genesis 1:26)? What connections might be made?
  - c. Now check other translations for any words and phrases you have found difficult. Does it help to know that Knox uses "master-gods" for "Baal"? Why does Knox speak of a "dowry" in verse 19? Does it help to know that Moffatt uses "munitions" in place of "war" in verse 18?
  - d. Now check the various commentaries to see what light is shed on this passage. What does one learn from these that is new? What ideas are now changed?

#### 4. Getting the Point

- a. What did this passage mean when it was first spoken? How was it received by those who heard it?
- b. What can it mean for us today? The text suggests making *new vows* and entering a new relationship. What vows and promises do you live by? What commitments have you outgrown? Is maturity a matter of making new vows? How is this related to confirmation? To what loyalties and goals has our society committed itself? Should any of these be changed?

#### Continued Exploration

The procedure outlined above will be useful for studying any passage of scripture, but it is difficult and calls for considerable practice. Another text that might be used in this way is John 15:12-17. In fact, the procedure is a good one to use in studying almost any brief passage of scripture. After you have become familiar with it you will find opportunities to use it all through life, and its continued use will open up to you a new and deeper understanding and appreciation of the Bible.

## 4

# Letting the Text Score Its Points

We have stressed that it is important to understand the details of each text if we are to get the point. But there is a danger in becoming so involved in the details that one never gets the message. So now we stress the other side of it, that each text was written to make a point, that the author spoke or wrote because he had something important to communicate, and in general, that important point was a matter about faith and life, about commitment and loyalty to God, about meaningfulness and freedom. We have not rightly listened to a text until we know how to seek out this center of the text to which all the details point.

### Digging for Buried Treasure

In this session we shall study Deuteronomy 14:1–21 especially because it obviously deals with matters that are of no concern to modern Americans. What interest could we possibly have in a set of rules by which the ancient Israelites determined which kinds of animals, fish, and birds they would eat? Well, many Bible passages at first glance seem to us equally irrelevant, but *are* they? If we dig beneath the surface we may discover buried treasure—meanings that we never saw before. As in the previous session, make this a work session and divide up responsibility for the various steps in the study. Each person should have read this chapter before the session, so that class time may be spent in working, individually or in teams, and then reporting and discussing the findings.

## 1. Seeing the Whole Picture

Ordinarily we would begin our study of this passage by going to the commentaries for information about the whole book and its historical background. But that would take too long. Let us merely note in passing that the reference books suggest two possible dates for the writing of this book: (a) the period about 1200 B.C., when Israel had just entered the promised land and was struggling against the Canaanites; and (b) the reign of King Josiah (625–605 B.C.) who launched a vigorous reform movement to purify the religion of Israel from pagan Assyrian influences (2 Kings 22–23). In either case, the book of Deuteronomy is addressed to a religious crisis in which Israel was in danger of allowing her worship of God to be undermined by pagan immorality and superstition.

Thus, in terms of context, we now see that these laws, which claim to be the will of God, tell the people of Israel how they must act in a time when their faith is being contaminated by foreign influences. How does this bear upon 14:1–21?

## 2. Sizing up the Passage

When we look more carefully at the passage, we discover that we have here four prohibitions, and that they sound something like the ten commandments:

“You shall not cut yourselves or make any baldness on your foreheads for the dead.” (verse 1)

“You shall not eat any abominable thing.” (verse 3)

“You shall not eat anything that dies of itself.” (verse 21)

“You shall not boil a kid in its mother’s milk.” (verse 21)

But what possible meaning does this have for *us*? The passage not only has dull laws, but it also has dull explanations of laws. The long section in verses 4–20 goes into great detail about what can be eaten and what cannot. If the law was dull, this is even worse. In verse 21 there is even an explanation of how to dispose of a carcass you cannot eat. This all sounds like legal language, very flat and unimaginative.

However, in verses 1, 2, and 21 we have three statements that do not sound at all like law:

“You are the sons of the LORD your God.” (verse 1)

“For you are a people holy to the LORD your God.” (verse 2)

“For you are a people holy to the LORD your God.” (verse 21)

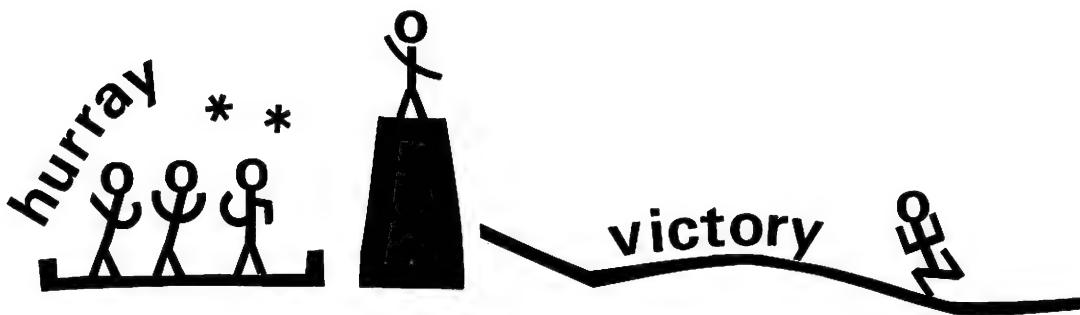


These phrases speak of things “beyond” the realms of law courts. We have here almost a passionate appeal to the people to be faithful to God. This is not *law*; we have here a second form that sounds more like a *sermon*. Someone in authority is making affirmations about the meaning of life.

We now have two kinds of data that help us to form an image of the unit.

- (a) It was written in a *crisis* when foreign influences were undermining and corrupting the faith of the Israelites.
- (b) It tells what the faithful must do (*law*) and gives reasons for doing it (*sermon*).

We may now suggest an image that expresses graphically what this text is really about.



It is a text which in the moment of crisis reminds the Israelites that they are someone different (the sermon) and, therefore, they must *act* differently (the law). They do not do the things that the others do, precisely because they have a special relation to this God.

The important part of the text for us is not the detailed law, but the sermonic material that sets the law in context. If we are to look for a point in the text, we find it not in the laws, but in the parts that make important affirmations about life and faith.

### 3. Understanding the Words

We need now to consider problems of detail in the text.

a. We need to check the difficult words in a Bible dictionary. For instance, the term abominable in verse 3. In *The Interpreter's*

*Dictionary of the Bible* (vol. A–D, p. 12) we learn that it means “whatever is ritually or ethically loathsome and repugnant to God and men.” Thus the command not to eat certain foods is grounded in the notion that they are repugnant to God and to his people. The word holy is a very important word, found in verses 2 and 21. In Richardson’s *Theological Word Book* (p. 215) we learn that it means “separate,” that which is reserved for the use of God. These two words, abominable and holy, which are the two most difficult words in the passage, thus form a vivid contrast that highlights the meaning of the passage. Israel is separated for God (holy) and she must leave alone the things that are repugnant to God (abominable). This is to be her special character in a time of crisis when all kinds of pressures were encouraging her to become unfaithful to God.

b. We should check with concordances to see where else these key words are employed. According to Young’s Concordance<sup>1</sup> (p. 6), “abominable thing” in this passage is equivalent to “abomination” which refers to things in every phase of life that are detestable or offensive to God, and Israel is admonished to avoid them. Using the same concordance (p. 487) we see that the term holy means “set apart” and is used to talk about Israel as a people set apart by God for a special purpose. Thus from a concordance, the first of these words, abominable, shows what Israel must avoid in order to keep the faith; the second word, holy, shows how good and unique it is to belong to God in this special way.

c. We now turn to other translations for additional clues about meaning. In 14:2, which is an important verse, Moffatt reads:

“For you are a people sacred to the Eternal your God, and the Eternal has chosen you to be his prized possession....”

Knox translates it:

“You, a people set apart for the Lord, chosen out of all nations on earth to be his very own.”

These variations help us get at the word holy and to discover that it speaks of the preciousness of Israel in the eyes of God.

d. We can now look at the commentaries to get some help. See especially *The Interpreter’s Bible* (vol. 2, pp. 421ff.). The commentaries are agreed that this long detailed passage is a warning to Israel in a time of crisis that she must be different from the Canaanites and

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<sup>1</sup> *Analytical Concordance to the Bible* by Robert Young. Funk & Wagnalls Company, New York. (Based on the King James Version, but this word is the same in both KJV and RSV.)

Assyrians because she lives for different purposes—she lives to do God's will.

#### 4. Getting the Point

Thus far we have followed the procedure suggested in the previous chapter. Now we wish to become more specific as we ask about the meaning of the text. Even a passage like this one has a theological center which gives meaning to all the details. What we most need in order to understand any passage in the Bible is the good judgment and common sense to locate this center and reflect upon it. In this passage, for example, we have two kinds of material. We have a mass of technical provisions that seem to be irrelevant. But sandwiched in between are the loaded sentences, verses 2 and 21.

What makes a passage theologically important? Let us say that (a) it concerns the *deep things of God* rather than the trivia of human activity, (b) it speaks to man to tell him *who he is and what his life is about*, and (c) it affirms that *faith matters amid all the confusion of life*. That is, it focuses upon the mature concerns and problems of life in terms of what is *meaningful*. To whom shall we be *loyal*? What *risks* are worth taking? What *decisions* about my life must I make? What *changes* must happen in my life? What *relationships* are important for my existence?

In our text, for example, the center of the text is "*you are a people holy to God.*" Notice that (a) it speaks of God as the center of our life (we belong to him), (b) it speaks to man and tells him whose he is (he belongs to God), and (c) it speaks of holiness as something that matters even in this crisis. This phrase tells the Israelite who he is in the midst of a crisis and that therefore he should act in certain ways and avoid acting in other ways.

If a person really understands that he is holy to God (living for God) in the midst of crisis, then he knows that he cannot cut his flesh or otherwise mutilate his body, as the Canaanites did, in mourning for the dead. He cannot eat unclean food just because others do it. He does not participate in pagan religious acts, such as boiling a young goat in milk, just because others enjoy it. Very specifically, he is directed to act in a certain way because he now remembers what his life is about. So the point of the passage, which in the beginning seemed so unimportant, is that *the people who belong to God act in a different way because of their faith.*

That obviously is a point that is meaningful not only to the

ancient Israelite but also to any person today who has faith. And this is where we come in. We have not yet listened to the text unless we let its main point get through to our lives. Suppose a person has faith of this sort, that he believes that people who belong to God act in a different way because of their faith. Suppose it applies to you. Well obviously, the old regulations of Deuteronomy 14 do not apply, because none of us is going to eat an eagle or a vulture, and none of us is tempted to boil a kid goat in the milk of its mother. Moreover, such practices would not be considered violations of our religious faith today.

But the real crisis is as great today as it was then. Let us compare the crises, so we may see not only why the Israelites acted differently, but also why in America today Christian teenagers should act differently.

This acting differently means not that we merely keep some rules, but rather that we honor our commitments, act in mature ways, and relate responsibly to persons and issues. To be Christian means to understand that our life has meaning, that our conduct matters to God who loves us, and that persons around us are important to God, so we treat them accordingly. The Christian faith is not a set of rules but a fresh understanding of what it means to act as a mature person, faithful to God.

At a very elementary level we must make decisions about *rules* that have been set up for us by society: Will we run a stop sign, falsify an income tax report, cheat on a test? We Christians value laws to the extent that they serve as safeguards, reminders, or guides in fulfilling our responsibility. But the real crises involve not rules, but *relationships*. How do we act when we are very angry with our parents? Do we stomp out and slam the door? How do we act when our high school gang is doing things we can't accept? Do we conform? Do we go along with the crowd? Do we stand against them and get rejected? And then how do we act when there is an unimportant, unpopular person around, a retarded person, a cripple, a person who is not dressed neatly? Do such persons really matter? What if our peers say they do not? Well, Christians know about a special dimension of life: Persons are valuable to God! So we treat them differently.

Sometimes the crisis is more difficult. Sometimes the *rules* say one thing while *relationships* demand another. In some places, the rules permit segregation, but obviously relationships do not. In



some places the rules say, “Kill your brother!” (call it war), but relationships demand something else. Laws can permit injustice, but our faith does not.

Christians act differently. Where? When? How? Christians know what is important: (a) fair, honest relationships with persons, and (b) a just, equitable society. But sometimes the choices are not clear. They were not clear among the Canaanites either.

Well, these are difficult questions, but they are questions put by the text in Deuteronomy 14:1–21 when we find its center. And once the center is found, all kinds of details spring to life. It poses the deep questions: What are the marks of a person of faith? How does he live his life? What are the marks of the church? How does it relate to society?

### Trying the Tools on Other Texts

A text much like Deuteronomy 14:1–21 is found in 1 Corinthians 8, which deals with a similar subject, but handles it in a quite different way. Here is a place in which you can discover the theological center on your own. If you have time, let everyone go to work on

this as you did on the Deuteronomy passage. See the "Suggested Procedure" at the end of this section.

1. Seeing the Whole Picture

- a. What is First Corinthians all about? Why was it written? For what purpose? What problems does it deal with?

2. Sizing Up the Passage

- a. What movement or progression is there in the passage? Can you tell where it begins and where it ends? Does it move toward any climax?
- b. What is the mood and tone of the passage? Is this good-humored advice, heavy-handed compulsion, or angry scolding?
- c. Do you get a picture of the text that catches its main points? Try drawing it.

3. Understanding the Words

- a. Study the tough words: idols, knowledge, conscience.
- b. By reference to concordances, determine other places where there are discussions of "idols" in the New Testament, considerations of "stumbling blocks," and "liberty." How do these help us understand this passage?
- c. Check with the various translations: Do the renderings of Phillips (in *The New Testament in Modern English*) or *The New English Bible* help with some of the difficult matters? For example, what help do you get from Phillips' translation of verse 8, "Our acceptance by God is not a matter of meat"?
- d. The commentaries will help us get at the real points in the crisis. Paul is resisting the influence of pagan religion. On this point check Craig, in *The Interpreter's Bible* (vol. 10, pp. 89ff.).

4. Getting the Point

- a. Now in light of what you have learned, find the theological center of the passage. Certainly it is not a chapter on meat, but remember what makes a passage theologically important: (a) it speaks of the deep things of God, (b) it tells man who he is and what his life is about, and (c) it affirms that faith matters in all the confusions of life. Clues are surely to be found in the notion that God wills *love* and not knowledge, *brotherhood* and not laws on diet. Try to formulate what this central thrust is about as you study the passage. Then, as the point becomes clear, find out where you stand with regard to it, by discussing the following questions.

Where in your life are sacrifices being made for false gods? for cars, dates, victories, high grades, fast reputation?

Where has our society made false sacrifices, such as discrimination, exclusiveness, destructiveness?

Where is the "weak brother" in your life? in our society?

What do we do when the issue is ambiguous and we therefore have no clear solutions? Is our faith still relevant?

### **Suggested Procedure:**

1. Briefly read the passage together and get first impressions from the group.
2. Spend a good bit of time in workshop with tools you now have.
3. Share results of study and formulate together what the center of the text is. Don't let any single person impose his notion of "center" on the group. Remember, it's all right if everyone doesn't agree, so long as every person is honest and open.
4. Compare the theological center of this passage with that of Deuteronomy 14:1-21.
5. Spend some time reflecting on the things that are relevant in terms of theological centers for texts. Are matters of meaningfulness, loyalty, risk, decision, change, and relationships things that ought to concern us more than they do? Why?

Many other passages that on the surface appear to be filled with irrelevant matters may be made meaningful if we can find the theological center. Two such passages are Deuteronomy 7:1-11 and Luke 3:23-38. Try one of these if you have more time.

## 5

# A Vocabulary That Says What We Mean

Many areas of life have their own vocabularies. Most of us cannot even understand a doctor when he talks about what is wrong with us, because he uses special medical terms that mean nothing to a layman. Electronics and space travel have produced new words that we see and hear every day, but only the engineers and technicians really know what they mean; for instance, transistor, frequency modulation (FM), and cosmic rays.

Have you ever realized that Bible students also have their own vocabulary? You might not think so, because many of the great words are so familiar that we think we know what they mean. But we really could not give accurate definitions of them. For example, salvation is a word that we use rather glibly, and yet most of us have never bothered to find out what it really means. Words are tools by which we can name the varied objects and experiences of life, but in order to use these tools intelligently we must understand their meaning.

### Faith: A Way of Relating

As an experiment in vocabulary building, let us work with the word faith. Obviously, this is a word we all use often and in a variety of ways, and we all assume we know what it means. But do we really know what the Bible writers mean by the term? To what dimension of our life does the Bible refer when it speaks of faith? How does it apply to us?



## 1. Finding Its Roots

To understand a word, we begin by looking at its etymology, that is, its origin and development. To what words is it related? For this, of course, we must consult a reliable dictionary. There we learn that the English word *faith* goes back to the Latin *fides*, which means trust, confidence, reliance, or belief.

But it is important to remember that the original language of the Bible is neither English nor Latin, and therefore we must go back to the languages of the Bible. The Old Testament was written in Hebrew, and *The Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible* (vol. E-J, p. 222) tells us that "faith" is a translation of the Hebrew *aman* which means firmness, stability, and trust. (Interestingly, the word has carried over into church use, so that to say "amen" to anything, means one has faith in it.) The same resource also tells us that the word *faith* in the Greek (which is the language of the New Testament) is *pisteuo* (p. 223) which in most cases means trust; it may also mean to rely on, give credence to, or believe.

We may now draw one small but very important conclusion about the word at this point. It is concerned with a *relationship* of loyalty and devotion between persons, a relationship of responsibility and allegiance, usually to God.

## 2. Tracing Its History

When we have located the meaning of a word in a general way by studying its derivation, we may then consider the career of the term as it has been used over a long period of time in the community of people who wrote and preserved the Bible. This is simply to ask the question, Where and in what ways has the term been used? Here we have two kinds of concerns.

a. We need to discover where the word is most commonly used in biblical texts. To determine this we shall examine a concordance. In *Nelson's Complete Concordance of the Revised Standard Version Bible* \* (p. 582) under "faith" we discover that in the Old Testament the word is used only eighteen times, but that it is used over

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\* If you are using RSV Bibles you should use an RSV concordance. Unfortunately, there is no *analytical* concordance of the RSV Bible, so if you wish to look up the Hebrew and Greek roots of English words you will need Young's *Analytical Concordance to the Bible* which is based on the King James Version. (For further information about concordances see the section on "Study Resources" on page 74.)

250 times in the New Testament. By glancing down the columns we see it is used most frequently in Romans, Galatians, and Hebrews. By scanning the phrases showing how faith is used in each reference we can get hunches as to the most common meaning of the word. We see immediately that most of the Old Testament passages speak of the people as breaking faith or keeping faith with God, obviously assuming that to break faith is a sin and that to keep faith is the right thing to do. This suggests that faith is the opposite of fickleness.

Then in Habakkuk 2:4 we learn that "the righteous shall live by his faith." Thus we see that faith is closely related to life, that the quality of life depends on faith.

We have noted in *The Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible* that the Greek root *pisteuo* means belief, as well as trust, so we also ought to look up in the concordance belief, believe, and believed. We find the first reference in Genesis 15:6 which states that living by God's promises is regarded as faith. It is interesting to note that again it is linked to righteousness, as in Habakkuk 2:4. We may look now at Psalm 27:13, because it is the first of several uses of faith in the Psalms. Here the term is used in a very strong confession about the reliability of God and the willingness of the believer to trust him completely and to wait patiently for his blessings.

Now from this surface examination of a few Old Testament passages, which we have selected almost at random, we have some definite ideas about the meaning of the word faith.

An examination of the New Testament uses is more difficult, because there are so many; but we have seen that faith is mentioned most often in Romans, Galatians, and Hebrews.

Let's begin with Romans. In the first chapter the term occurs six times (verses 5, 8, 12, 17). Faith is described in terms of obedience, proclamation, and encouragement. The first three uses suggest that Christians are different people because of their faith. Notice that in the three uses, faith defines the relation to (a) Christ, (b) the world, and (c) other Christians. In verses 16-17 faith is spoken of as the way we know of God's power, and the author quotes Habakkuk 2:4 which we have already considered. Again, faith is linked to life and righteousness.

A great cluster of uses is found in Galatians 3 where faith appears in verses 2, 5, 7, 8, 9, 11, 12, and 14. The passage needs to be studied very closely, but certain things immediately become clear.

(a) Paul contrasts faith with the law. The law as a way of life gets people into trouble, but faith liberates persons to obey God. (b) The great example of faith is Abraham, and the passage of Genesis 15:6 is quoted here. (c) The concern of faith to get right with God leads again to a quotation of Habakkuk 2:4, as it did in Romans 1:17. (d) Through faith one receives the promises of God.

A third cluster of uses is found in Hebrews 11 speaking of various persons who had great faith, persons who were willing to take great risks because they trusted completely in God's trustworthiness.

We now see that the person who has faith is enabled by his close, deep, and honest relation to God, to live a life of distinctive character or quality.

b. Notice that thus far in "Tracing Its History" we have relied mostly upon a concordance to find where and how the word faith has been used. It is now time to refine our understanding of the word, to focus more sharply upon its basic meaning. To do this we shall need the help of scholars who have studied the word in a more systematic fashion. For this kind of help we turn to various other tools.

*Bible Dictionaries.* Many helpful insights are offered by *The Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible* in addition to the brief observations we have already noted regarding the Greek and Hebrew roots of the words faith and belief. Study the outline given at the beginning of the article, and you will be able to pick out quickly the information you want about any of the various uses of the word, in the Old Testament or the New. See the list of Resources on page 73 for information about other Bible dictionaries.

*Word Books.* In addition to the dictionaries there are books that discuss a limited number of significant words in considerable detail, but more briefly than most Bible dictionaries. We have already been introduced to Richardson's *A Theological Word Book of the Bible*, which on page 75 defines faith as "the criterion of right relationship with God." See other wordbooks in the resources on page 74.

c. As we work along with this almost overwhelming mass of information, notice especially the development of the term as it moves along through biblical history. As time passes meanings change. In each new situation the word has taken on new shades of meaning. As we move from Old Testament to New Testament, even the *object* of faith changes from God to Jesus as the Christ of God. And even

within the New Testament there are certain significant changes. In Paul's writings faith is set over against *law*, in John it is contrasted with *knowledge*, and in Hebrews it is a mood of *risk* which characterizes the believer. As we study any particular text, therefore, it is helpful to discover which of these dimensions will likely be stressed before we begin.

### 3. Hearing It in Context

Of course, it is never enough to know about a word in general. We do not really add a word to our vocabulary until we can use it intelligently in context. And this means that as we study the use of a word through the Bible, we need to center down on specific texts and study it in detail.

As we have studied the word faith, we have several times run across its usage in Habakkuk 2:4. The poetry of Habakkuk was written in a time of despair, when men were about to give up on both God and themselves. (See *The Interpreter's Bible*, vol. 6, p. 988, for an excellent discussion of this passage.) The opening verses of the book are a passionate cry of hopelessness, and this verse then comes as part of God's answer to the despair of men.

Now to understand fully what this text came to mean, we need to look at various *places* where it is used in the New Testament.

Romans 1:16-17—In his great defense of the gospel Paul quotes Habakkuk 2:4 (though the wording is not exactly the same) in speaking of the power of God, to show that the joy of the Christian life can come to anyone in any situation who is willing to trust himself to God.

Galatians 3:11—In a vigorous argument against those who trust in their own resources, Paul again employs Habakkuk 2:4 to argue that the only people who have adequate resources for life are those who rely completely upon God and not upon self.

Hebrews 10:38 is addressed to a church in time of great persecution. Many Christians were tempted to give up the faith rather than be tortured. The phrase from Habakkuk 2:4 is used again here to assure them that, in spite of suffering and even dying, this faith brings the promises of God.

These uses of Habakkuk 2:4 with its great affirmation about faith show that faith is not a theoretical or abstract notion, but a relationship or a quality of life that has great bearing upon the way people live in the midst of crises and temptations.

#### **4. Finding Its Distinctive Meaning**

We have considered a great many uses of this word faith, so now let us try to summarize what the word seems to mean in the Bible:

It refers to a relationship with another person, God or Jesus.

It talks about a quality of that relationship by which we find our security and meaning in the other person.

It is an exclusive relationship in that it allows no other options.

It is a total relationship, affecting every dimension of life.

It is a radical relationship, completely changing one who experiences it.

It calls for a bold and risky decision about who we are, whom we shall trust, and how we shall live.

It has decisive effects upon our day-to-day living.

Now in order that we may fully appreciate what this means, we should pause to note that this radical notion of relation and transformation that is expressed in the word faith as used in the Bible is quite different from most popular ideas of faith. The word in popular usage often does not even have an object, so people "have faith," but in nothing in particular. Or the idea of faith is cheapened by assuming that we may have faith in several things at the same time, as in the American way of life, the Democratic party, the soundness of the American dollar, and the catechism of the church. Or it may be used wrongly with reference to things, rather than a person, as faith in a creed or an institution. Or faith may be thought of as less than total, so that it is kept entirely apart from politics, race, or economics. To summarize as briefly as possible what we have learned, faith is a special kind of relationship to God, a relationship that makes one a different kind of person.

#### **5. Making the Word Our Own**

After we have carefully examined an important Bible word we need to relate it to our lives, asking ourselves:

What has the word to do with me?

To whom am I faithful? Who do I know that is absolutely reliable?

What relationships of trust can I really count on?

If I am not always faithful, does that mean I am fickle?

What does it mean to me and to my church if there really is a God who is completely reliable?

## Trying the Tools: Glory

Now that we have learned a basic plan for studying a biblical word, let's apply it to the study of the word glory. It is assumed that members of the class will have read this chapter before class; then the session can be devoted entirely to the study outlined below, making it a real work session. Assign responsibility for the various parts of the study to individuals or teams and let each report the findings. You may follow the suggested procedure or adapt it to your own interests and circumstances. Leave time for discussion of the questions at the end of the chapter.

1. *Finding Its Roots:* Spend a few minutes discussing What does "glory" mean in common English? (See the dictionary.) What do the Hebrew *kabod* and the Greek *doxa* mean, and how does knowing them change our understanding? (See a Bible Dictionary or Young's *Analytical Concordance*.)
2. *Tracing Its History:* Divide into teams for the following study, and let each report to the whole group.
  - a. Where is it most used (see concordance)? Notice the cluster of passages in Psalms, Isaiah, Ezekiel, Romans, and Revelation. Check some of the passages in order to get a feel for the term. Look at some of the familiar passages such as Psalms 19:1; 24:7, 9; Isaiah 6:3; 40:5; Luke 2:14; John 1:14. What notions begin to appear as central?
  - b. Focus on its meaning and development as outlined in a Bible dictionary. *The Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible* (vol. E–J, pp. 401ff.) will be helpful. What statements are made that help us most to understand the concept?
  - c. What do we begin to learn about the development of the word as it moves from Old Testament into New Testament and from Paul to the later writers?
3. *Hearing It in Context:* Now select some passage that seems to be central for understanding the word and study it in some detail. See, for example, Isaiah 42:8; John 1:14. How does your investigation of the concept "glory" help you understand these passages in a new way?
4. *Finding Its Distinctive Meaning:* Now summarize the meaning of the word. Note things that you never knew before about the word, the changes in your thinking about it, the distinctive qualities about the term, and how this affects your understanding of

the Christian faith and your own life. Notice especially the ways in which the term is used in popular language in contrast with the Bible. For instance, "he just did it for glory," or "he hogged all the glory himself."

5. *Making the Word Our Own*: Now think about the word glory and how it relates to us as individual Christians. What "overwhelms" you? What is truly *glorious* in your life? Does God overwhelm men today? If he does this, how does it change our notion of self and of life in his world? See Psalm 8:5: What does it mean for you to be crowned "with glory and honor"? How does this kind of glory differ from God's glory?

### Continued Exploration

Almost any major biblical word can be fruitfully studied in this way, for example, love, power, authority, grace, son, father, king.

What are some of the words that you might find most interesting to study?

Why is it that so many Bible words often have quite different meanings in popular usage today?

Are we careful in the church to use words precisely? Are we in public life generally? Does it matter? Why, or why not?

How important are problems of communication for our social well-being? What are some examples of misunderstanding resulting from the use of words with a variety of meanings?

## 6

# Letting Symbols Be Symbols

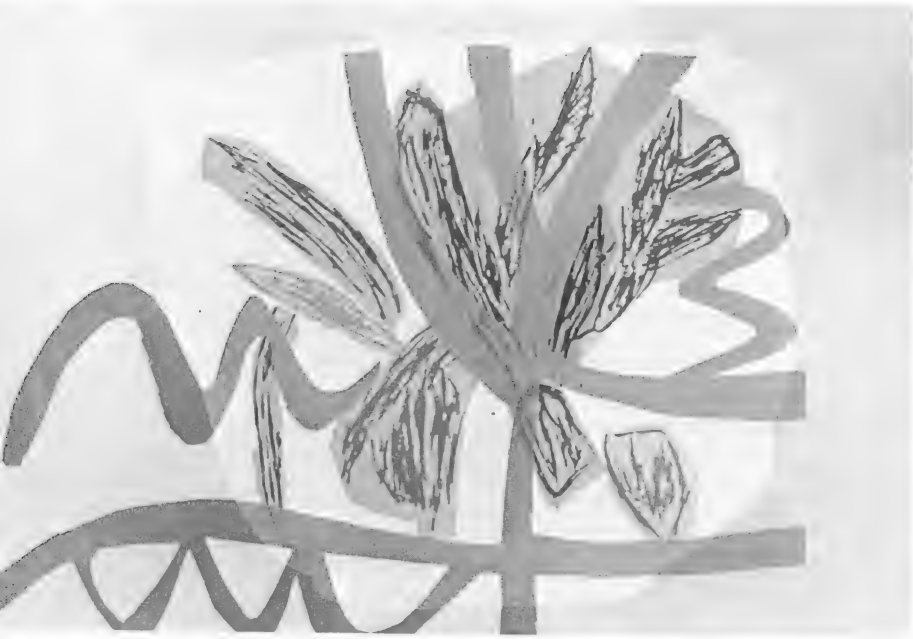
Thus far in this course we have suggested methods that can be handled in a precise and accurate way. We have insisted that one needs to be as careful in Bible study as a scholar or scientist in any field of research. We are seeking to be scientific and there is no substitute for care and discipline. But there is a danger to this approach if Bible study is not *more* than that.

To be sure, biblical study requires the best that our minds can give, but it also asks of us the response of our feelings, an emotional response to the text. It invites us to "feel in" to what is being said to us, to respond with our hearts, and to make a commitment to its truths. Bible study demands the response of our whole being, so that we become different persons as a result of it.

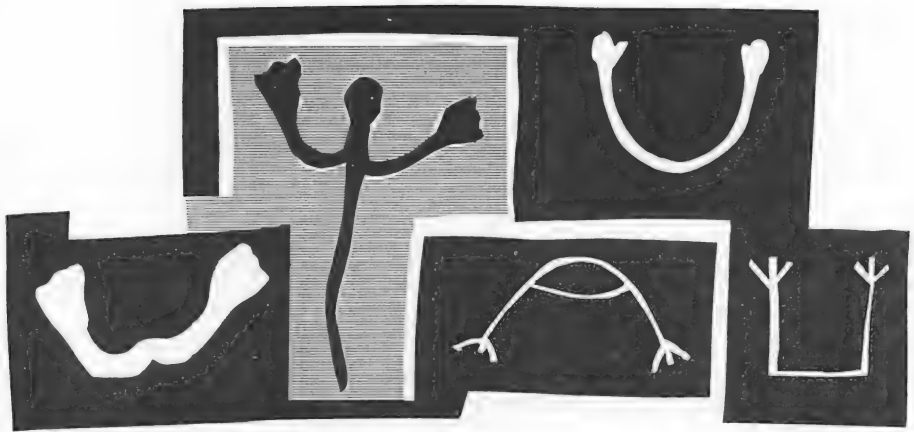
Moreover, we must not let scientific analysis blind us to the fact that the text really concerns *us*. We may carry out the most careful analysis of a text according to the best methods, but unless we take it seriously as *addressed to us in our situation*, we will not be honestly studying the Bible, we will not be taking it seriously. We must recognize that in biblical texts we do not have logical propositions that need only be analyzed, nor scientific formulations that can be tested; but the Bible is full of powerful symbols that can have decisive impact upon our lives if we will let them.

A symbol is a visible or audible representation of something important that cannot be expressed in logical, scientific language. It deals with things too deep and personal and indescribable to be analyzed. Each of us lives by many symbols. A wedding ring is a





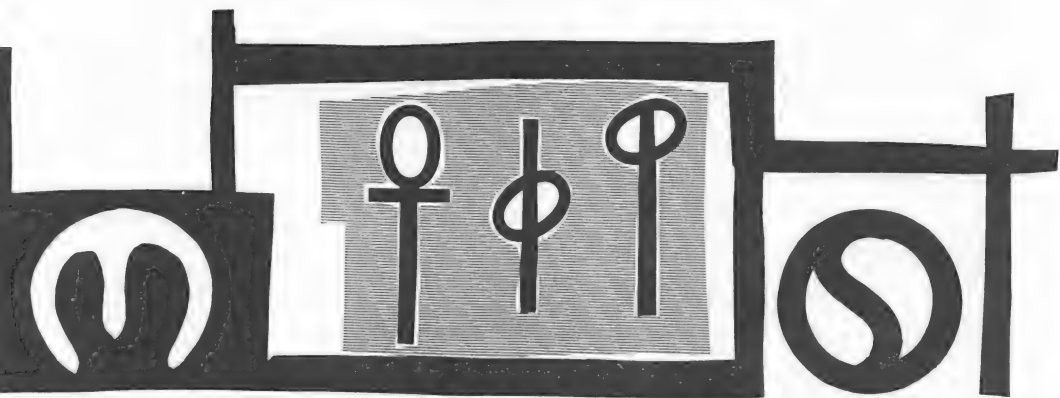
*flower power*



symbol of the vows of fidelity and respect that two persons have made to each other. Bread and wine are the symbols of the assurance of Christ that he is present with his church in the celebration of his supper. A white man taking part in a civil rights demonstration is a symbol that he counts every man his brother. In each of these cases, the symbol expresses a profound relationship between persons. It bears witness to love and concern and fidelity that involve both partners to the relationship.

Think about symbols in your own life. For instance, a football letter jacket which says, "I belong to the team, and we stick together." An odd haircut which says, "I belong to the gang and I take them seriously." Even a special honk of a car horn is a symbol of loyalty between certain students in the high school in our town. These are all expressions of relationships that are important and yet can be expressed only in symbols. It is not at all an overstatement to say that we live out the important dimensions of our lives by the symbols we value. We live by relationships, by loyalties, loves, commitment. We can speak of such relationships only in symbols.

The Bible is a book of such symbols, a book that brings us into contact with realities so deep and personal and indescribable that they cannot be defined and analyzed. In the Bible we are concerned with the *love* of God for us, and with our *need* for him and *loyalty* to him. Such matters of relationship really cannot be analyzed in a logical scientific way, because to do that is to miss the point. These things cannot be analyzed and yet they must be expressed. This is what good poetry and music and art are about. The symbols the Bible employs are words, but they are words loaded with power and encircled with a mystery that speaks of a relation which no outsider



can understand. And if we are to be grasped by these words, we need to recognize them as symbols. That they cannot be measured or explained does not mean they are not true and important.

For example, the very first sentence of the Bible is, "In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth." Taken rightly as a symbol, that phrase gives voice to our deep conviction that our life is in God's hands, that we are here for his purposes because he loves us, and that the meaning of our life cannot be separated from his concern for us. The words point to (symbolize) a very important dimension of our life.

Now if we refuse to let these words be a symbol and take them as a flat, one-dimensional statement that must be analyzed and explained, then we find in it only the notion that at a given point in time there was no earth or heaven but that when God said a word they suddenly came into existence. Obviously the story understood in that literal sense runs counter to all that we know of science and the nature of the solar system.

We may or may not let the affirmation become a symbol that says something of decisive importance for our lives. *Taken as a symbol*, it says something important about how I live out my life, and why. *Taken only as a scientific formulation*, it tells about a remote beginning but nothing about the meaning of it.

## Symbols and Problems

There is much misunderstanding of symbol in the church, especially as we seek to read the Bible. A symbol expresses or points to something important which cannot be understood or explained



*Christ heals the blind and lame,  
sixth-century manuscript illumination.*

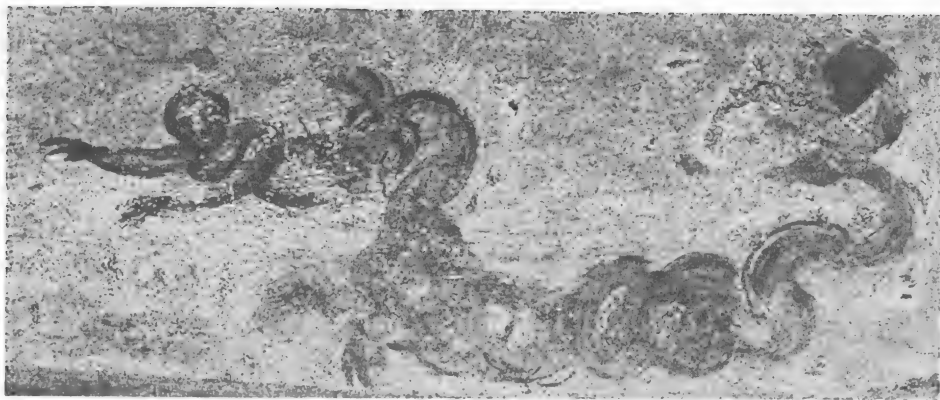
scientifically, but many people think symbol refers to something unimportant or nonexistent. Two kinds of symbolic language cause special problems:

It is said, and rightly, that the Bible contains much *myth*. When some people hear this, they become frightened and defensive, as though this meant that the Bible contains lies and is false. But by myth we mean a story about the deepest things of the faith, things that cannot be proven by reason, but which nevertheless matter a great deal to us. Myths usually make use of symbolic language about the things that matter most to us.

A myth is not necessarily a story that is not true. It is basically an interweaving of symbols into a story by which we try to understand and express the deep meaning of our life and our relation to God. Thus, the Genesis story about creation is a myth about God the creator, expressing the conviction that God stands behind and before our life on this planet and that all life is responsible to him. In this myth we are talking of something that cannot be proven or disproven by science or logic, because it belongs to a dimension of life that is different and we must accept it as different.

So in the New Testament, we may speak of the ascension of Jesus as a myth. This does not mean that Jesus is not Lord supreme on the very throne of God, but it means that the way the matter is told is not subject to scientific verification. Because it cannot be proven does not mean it is false or unimportant. Some of the most important truths of our lives cannot be proven, but must simply be affirmed and confessed.

A second kind of symbolic expression that we need to understand is that of *miracle*. Many people want to debate miracle as to



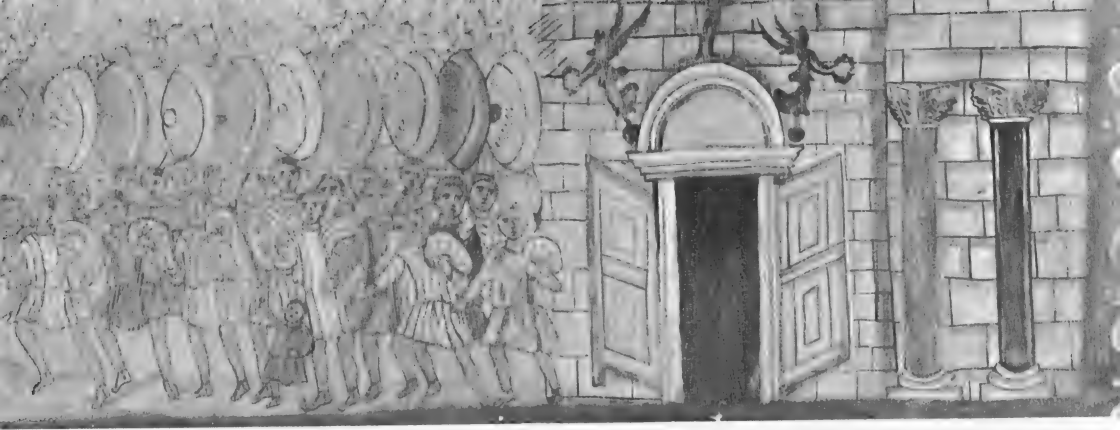
*Jonah is saved from the belly of the whale,  
fourth-century catacomb fresco.*

whether it is scientifically possible or whether it violates the “laws of nature.” But that again is a misunderstanding. A miracle is not concerned with laws of nature but rather is an event in which we perceive something of God’s love and power in a decisive way. Thus, for example, in the story of the burning bush in Exodus 3 the important point is not that a bush can burn without being burned up but that God comes in decisive ways into peoples’ lives at unexpected moments. A miracle then is not simply something that happened, but an event or experience that says something to us about the person of God and the meaning of life. A miracle is known only by the faithful, only by those who know that life is a disclosure of God. A miracle is not a touch of magic or a doing of the impossible, but an overpowering realization of God’s presence in our world.

We have nothing to fear or lose by the recognition of both myth and miracle in the Bible. But it is urgent that we understand them and learn to respond to them with our whole person, knowing that they are pointers to the deep and precious things of our lives.

### **Appreciating a Symbol: Isaiah 51:9–11**

One passage that uses a typical symbol is Isaiah 51:9–11. But before we can appreciate its meaning, we must first do the disciplined work of technical analysis which we have outlined in previous chapters. Right now we shall quickly summarize our research on this. The passage belongs to chapters 40–55 which, as we already learned, have as their historical context the Jewish exile in Babylon. The general thrust of these poems is to declare that God is going to change history (destroy the Babylonian empire) so that



*The exodus from Egypt, Dura Europas synagogue, 236 A.D.*

Israel can go home (see chapter 4). The image of verses 9–10 is that of a mighty warrior destroying a sea monster or dragon.

### 1. Just a Mere Dragon

A study of details might well center in the name Rahab, which *The Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible* (vol. R–Z, p.6) tells us is “the mythological dragon vanquished by Yahweh in a primordial combat.” This means it refers in *myth* to a sea monster which God defeated and thereby won for himself a mighty victory. He killed the dragon. Now this does not help much until we look at the concordances. There we learn that in Psalm 87:4; 89:10; and Isaiah 30:7, as well as in our passage, “Rahab” refers to Egypt and in each case recalls the act of God to save Israel from Egypt in the exodus. Thus, by looking at dictionary and concordance, we discover that the mythical notion of the dragon is used in the Bible to talk symbolically about the historical event of the exodus.

In getting help from different translations, it is most instructive that Knox (*The Old Testament*) in verse 9 has: “What other power was it that smote our insolent enemy, wounded the dragon?” For the difficult word Rahab, he has substituted the phrase “insolent enemy,” which is a really accurate term for mighty Egypt whom Israel feared so much.

Thus far, then, we have three kinds of data which help us get at the passage:

- a. We have the use of an old myth which told of God winning a great victory.
- b. We have biblical evidence that Israel took this old myth and let it refer to the exodus event.

- c. We know from the historical context of Isaiah 51:9–11 that the poet is saying that the old God who is so powerful to kill the dragon (i.e., cause the exodus) is still powerful and can lead us out of exile in Babylon.

The point of the entire unit, then, is that the God who in the old days was powerful is *still* powerful, and can be trusted to save his people from their misery. The myth then becomes a way to express faith and confidence in God. It is out of this confidence that the joy and gladness of verse 11 can be proclaimed. Certainly, be joyful! For God who saved our forefathers is still saving us, and we can trust him.

## 2. Rejection of the Symbol

Much more could be done by way of technical analysis, but let us move on to the question of a literal interpretation of the myth. The myth in these verses gives a very naïve image of God as a soldier who rolls up his sleeves, takes his sword in hand, and cuts down the feared and hated sea monster.

Now if we fail to understand the freedom and imaginativeness with which a myth may be handled, we might try to handle this in a cold, scientific way. We might say to ourselves: "This is a primitive way of understanding God, but now we are sophisticated and educated and we know that the world isn't like this. There really are no evil sea monsters and certainly God is not a soldier with a strong arm and a sword." This sort of thinking would let us feel superior to the text, ignore it, and not let it speak its real message. That would not make the text irrelevant; we would simply be missing the point.

## 3. When a Symbol Comes Alive

But that is not a sound way to handle such a text. One of the questions we need always to ask of such a text is, *What in the text is symbollic and therefore must be interpreted symbolically?* And if we find it (not all texts have it), then we must determine to what in life the symbol refers—something deep and personal and indescribable.

So in this text, we suggest that the symbolic elements are (a) the mention of God as warrior and (b) the mention of a monster that must be defeated. Now let us seek for the meaning behind them. The notion of God as a warrior (which is found throughout

the Bible) is the expression of the belief that the great ruler of life is neither passive nor neutral, but that he is active and powerful, involved and concerned for us, and that he intervenes in powerful ways for his creatures whom he loves. This is the conviction that down deep, at the very bottom of life, we can find meaning and joy, and that the strongest forces in the world are *for* us and not out to get us. The Bible says it in a symbolic, mythological way, but it is nonetheless true, according to Christian faith. Put in more conventional language, the myth says that God loves us in decisive ways.

The mention of the dragon of course cannot be taken as a scientific observation. It is a symbol for all the forces of evil and hatred and destruction that threaten us all, the monsters of war and poverty, disease and ignorance, hatred and prejudice. We may interpret this in a very modern way, but we cannot escape the insight of the myth that there are forces at work in life that are really out to destroy all that is good and whole and human.

Now if we put these two elements of myth together, we have the gospel of the faith:

- a. There is a God who is for us.
- b. There are evil forces against us.
- c. The powerful concern of God will destroy all the powers of evil.

This is the meaning of the crucifixion and resurrection of Jesus, stated in abstract terms; the latter is the ground of all Christian hope. In Isaiah 51:9-11 it is said in highly symbolic language, but that makes it no less true.

The symbol, then, can be meaningful and alive because it talks about life as we really experience it, and it asks questions: Do you understand *your* life this way? Have you seen the monster at work around you? Are you convinced that God will destroy the monster?

#### 4. Myth About *Us*

The vital thing about a myth is that if it is an authentic one, it must be *about us*, it must describe *our* situation and really illuminate *our* problems. And if we look at it this way, we soon discover that this kind of text really concerns our own life. If we analyze a myth in a cold and detached manner, then we cannot really understand what it is all about.

So to "hear the symbol" we need to find in it points of contact with our own life:



Where are the evidences of an *evil monster out to get you?*

—in being broke when your friends are going to a show?

—in having a sprained ankle the day of the big game?

—in not having the freedom an older sister gets with her friends?

—in having no one to talk to about important things because parents are too busy?

—in having a habit that you want to break and cannot?

Of course, these things can be understood in other ways, but the biblical symbol affirms that these are not trite and petty matters but are forces in our lives which tear us up and undo us, and we are sometimes helpless to cope with them. The dragon then becomes a representation for all that is “against us” in life.

Where are the evidences of a *God that is for us?*

—in parents who understand us and listen to us in our problems?

—in friends who accept us even in our bad moments?

—in adults who have patience with us when we show our weak side?

—in awarenesses that this is a good world to live in, even when we get down on ourselves?

—in belonging to groups where there is support and concern for each of its members?

The symbol concerns not only our personal feelings and experiences. It may speak to us about our involvement in the great public issues of our day. The monsters of poverty, discrimination, ignorance, disease, and injustice must be fought by individuals, organizations, and governments today. So we “fight cancer” and declare “war on poverty,” still speaking in terms of an evil enemy who must be defeated and destroyed. But we should not make the mistake of thinking of these evil monsters as purely objective forces to be attacked. We must remember that we ourselves may be participating in the evil actions of the monsters; our own selfishness, ignorance, indifference, and laziness may be partly responsible for the evils of our society.

The symbol not only helps us understand, but it serves as an important way of expressing our faith. The symbol not only speaks of the presence of evil and unhappiness on the one hand and of joy and healing power on the other, but it also tells of the one overcoming the other, of the one being stronger and more powerful than the other. So the symbol serves in two ways: (a) It helps us *to realize*

and appreciate the situation, to see how real the struggle is, and (b) it invites us to share in the struggle and to have faith in the outcome.

When we listen to such symbols openly and intelligently, something happens to the biblical text before us. We discover that it is not simply telling us about life "back there" but that it really is speaking about us, about our situation. It understands with amazing clarity our problems and points to resources for dealing with them.

## Trying the Tools on Other Texts

Now look at a similar story in Mark 4:35–41 and listen as it speaks about your life. Again it is assumed that every class member will have read this chapter before class and that most of the session may be used for the following study.

1. Technical Analysis: Read the passage and then discuss the form, setting, structure, context, and important words as we have suggested above.
2. Rejection of the Symbol: Try to understand the story *scientifically*. Could it have happened? Does this approach help or hinder our understanding? In what ways is such an approach irrelevant? What does it miss?
3. When a Symbol Comes Alive: The central symbol here is *water* (sea) which is more than a pleasant, quiet lake. What does it mean? What did it mean to those who first heard the story? What resource books should we consult? Divide up responsibility for this study, and share results. What does this story really say about Jesus?
4. Myth About Us: What are the points of contact in our life? Where is there a hostile sea which frightens us and threatens to destroy us? Where is there in life one who can quiet it by saying "Be still!"? How can this help you analyze your situation? In what way does it invite you to *faith*?
5. Conclude by reading the story again and discussing how your understanding of it has changed by careful, intelligent study.

### Suggested Resources:

Use the standard dictionaries, concordances, and translations. Check in the commentary on the passage that is given in *The Interpreter's Bible* (vol. 7, pp. 708ff.).

Check the same story in Matthew 8:18ff., and in Luke 8:22ff., to note differences which may be a clue to emphasis.

On the symbol itself, check the wordbooks. See, for instance, Richardson, *A Theological Word Book of the Bible*, under "water" (p. 279), and *The Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible* (vol. R-Z, p. 809). Note especially the comment, "the raging, unruly waters symbolized the powers which are opposed to God's sovereignty and therefore threatened to destroy the meaningfulness of history, as though the world ever had the possibility of return to pre-creation chaos."

## **Continued Exploration**

When we let symbols be symbols, we discover that the Bible in its most difficult parts can come alive for us and be relevant. Another such text that we might examine is Colossians 1:15-20. The central symbol is expressed in the phrase: "In him all things hold together."

What are the symbols by which we live?

What makes us able to appreciate and appropriate symbols as our own? What often keeps us from relating to them?

As we grow older are we more able, or less able, to live by symbols?

Is maturity our willingness to let go of some symbols?

Is maturity our willingness to hold on to some symbols?

Does it help to think of the church as a community with shared symbols?

Does this approach solve some of the questions you have about the Bible? Does it create others?

## 7

# Thinking Like Poets

If we are to hear the Bible with our whole being, we must learn to think as poets. And that is very difficult in a society that places little value on things poetic. One who thinks like a poet today will have a tough time in most areas of life. In the scientific laboratory one must strive for exactness in every detail. In the business world precision and clarity are of great importance. In our busy everyday activities and relationships much depends upon clear communication, and the person who fails to communicate is the person who is vague, imprecise, or careless in his use of words.

But there is a realm where the exactness of the laboratory and the precision of the business world are often inadequate. This is the great area of life in which we are concerned with thoughts and feelings about deep questions of meaning and personal relationships. In this area a word can never mean only one thing, for it may carry many nuances of meaning; and if we try to reduce it to one meaning, we may rob it of *all* meaning.

We know that in many experiences of life words seem to spring spontaneously out of deep feelings. This kind of expression has a poetic quality even though it is written in prose form. The writer's expression of feeling kindles *our* feelings. Tyrone Guthrie says that poetry reveals "a meaning over and above the literal meaning" of the words, and that "an emotional Over-and-Above is evoked" by it. It is this "over-and-above" quality that we must learn to feel if we are to hear the Bible speaking to us, because much of its most significant material—even the prose—has this poetic quality. The Bible

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FAITH  
FRIENDS

writers express their deep feelings and convictions which do not always need to be spelled out, and perhaps *cannot* be, but which call for a definite response and commitment from us.

## A Case in Point

### 1. The Mess We Are In

One of the brilliant examples of this multidimensioned use of words which come alive when we think as poets is found in Jeremiah 4:23–26. If we will open ourselves to the deep message of these words they breathe with the passion of a man in panic for his people. The point we are wanting to make is this: The whole poem conveys panic, but we will not hear it unless we are able to get beneath the literal meaning of the words and to “feel in” to the mood of the poet and understand what it means to him.

But before we try to “feel in” to the poet’s message we must face the difficult and often dry technical questions of detail as outlined in previous sessions. Summarizing quickly at this point, such detailed study would reveal the fact that in the years before 609 B.C., Jeremiah, the prophet, became convinced that his people in Judea were going to be destroyed by the armies of the Babylonians because they had not trusted God fully.

Jeremiah is alarmed and concerned for his people, and feels compelled to warn them that this is no routine military invasion, but that it will threaten the very existence of the nation and of everyone and everything in it.

We can well understand this language of total destruction in our time as we ponder the possibility of nuclear destruction and remember the tragic events of Hiroshima and Nagasaki. Jeremiah’s words seem almost an exact reversal of the creation story in Genesis, declaring that creation is now to be undone. Thus, “waste and void” in verse 23 is the same technical term used in Genesis 1:2 (without form and void) to describe the chaos of the universe before God created the world and life. He inverts the whole process of creation to show the disappearance of light (see Genesis 1:3), the dissolution of the earth (see Genesis 1:10), and the end of man (see Genesis 1:26), of the birds (Genesis 1:20), and of fertile fields (Genesis 1:22).

In order to picture the structure of the whole passage, we might arrange the words and phrases in two columns as follows:

*Parts of Creation*

earth

heavens

mountains

hills

man

birds

fruitful land

cities

*Forms of Un-creation*

waste and void

no light

quaking

move to and fro

no man

fled

desert

laid in ruin

The first column recalls the good creation of God as told in Genesis 1. The second column describes the destruction and ruin that will result from God's anger. The poetic structure of the whole is heightened by the fourfold cry, "I looked—I looked—I looked—I looked."

In terms of context we may say simply that the poet inverts the creation story to try to make his fellow citizens realize that great trouble is about to come upon them.

## 2. Letting the Prophet Speak as a Poet

When we have thus analyzed the context and structure, we may conclude that we have gotten at the meaning of the passage, and indeed we have. But we have not yet let it open up all its nuances to us as poetry. If we refuse to let it be poetry, then we may take it point by point and notice the analysis of the prophet:

He said the earth would pass away.

He said the heavens would be darkened.

He said man would disappear.

He said the surface of the earth would be ruined.

This is a rather flat scientific response to the words, and it is not wrong. But it misses so much! For if one takes it this way, one can draw several conclusions: (a) He was wrong; it didn't really happen. (b) He was looking to the far future and really talking about the nuclear destruction we may yet see. (c) He greatly overstated his case, and really didn't mean what he said.

But none of these is really the case: (a) We can say it didn't happen only if we let his poetry be reduced to prose. (b) We can say he looked to the far future only if we ignore his own time and place in history. (c) We can say he overstated his case only if we think he was dishonest. But there is a fourth alternative, that he meant what

he said and did not exaggerate, he spoke of his own time and not the far future, and it really came to pass, if we let him be a poet.

If we let him be a poet, then his words evoke in us an “emotional over-and-above.” Over and above the obvious talk about nature and earth, over and above the talk about human society and the surface of the earth, there is a deepness and a painfulness which the prophet is talking about. When all these words are clustered together—earth, heavens, mountains, hills, man, birds, fruitful land, cities—they mean something more than the objects to which they clearly refer. They refer to all that men valued in the time of Jeremiah—peace and prosperity, the joy of life in secure homes, faith in the blessings of God upon the people and their religious and political leaders—all the things that make life worth while.

And what is to happen? Well, again the words mean more than appears at first glance. It is more than lights going out, more than an earthquake, more than the loss of vegetation and wildlife. Taken all together, these words—waste and void, no light, quaking, move to and fro, no man, fled, desert, ruins—speak of the despair, hopelessness, and utter emptiness that men feel when reality is taken out of their hands. Jeremiah is declaring that life as men have known it and enjoyed it is to be withdrawn and that nothing they can do will ever restore it. Man is at the mercy of a force that is robbing him of his manhood, his human society, his culture, his self-understanding.

But what the poet predicted came to pass almost literally. In 587 B.C. the Babylonian armies came a second time and took it all away, the temple (Jeremiah 7:14), the ark (Jeremiah 3:16), the king (Jeremiah 39:7), the city (Jeremiah 38:23). All these were symbols of reality, and how could man live without them? How can he live when all marks of status and respect and security and importance and hope are taken from him? That is the question the poet asks of his contemporaries.

### **3. Letting the Poet Be a Poet to Us**

But we are not in ancient Israel watching the approach of the Babylonians. If this is all that the poetry conveys, then it is hardly relevant to us. But this is precisely the power of good poetry, that it lets each of us hear its message in his own context, so that the poetry not only carries the meaning the poet intends it to have, but also reflects the meaning we bring to it.





Here, for example, the passionate expression of despair and the destruction of all that is precious can speak to and out of our own situations of despair, for this poem is about every situation in which we feel undone. We feel what the poet felt when we quarrel with our parents and we say things that hurt. The conversation ends in a painful silence. We want to say something to bridge the gap, but we simply are not able. We are left feeling very much alone and helpless. We have a strange sinking feeling in the stomach, an odd combination of guilt and anger and shame. At such a moment, we feel as though all that is important and real is taken away from us; we feel something of the desolation that Jeremiah described—a feeling that there is nothing we can depend on, that even the earth is shaking under our feet.

But it is not simply in personal matters that we experience such feelings. The great public events of our day also affect us this way. For example, on November 22, 1963, when President Kennedy was killed in Dallas, no matter what their political views, most Americans were stunned. We felt almost as though life were closing in upon us, that something of reality was being taken from us and we could not resist it.

*Look* and they are waste and void, *look* and they quake, *look* and all is laid in ruin. This is poetry and it is poetry about our own situation in life. Where are the places where existence caves in upon us? Parents watching a child die of a blood disease and not being

able to understand why. A married man whose bride of two months dies. In all our moments of loss, this language speaks for us as well as to us. The Bible, taken as poetry about *us*, can give sense to our lostness, tools for understanding, and faith in the “over-and-above” of life. For as we dig underneath our losses, we find that One who is over and above all. This poetry not only tells what is happening, but reaches for meaning and explanation and finds it in faith. This kind of passionate poetry thus can evoke in us a faith affirmation that looks beyond our losses to the Lord of our losses.

### Trying the Tools on Other Texts

Having examined a procedure for really hearing a text, apply the same procedure to the potent text of Ezekiel 18:30–32. On the face of it, this is a statement that God wants us to live and not to die. But the richness of these words and the power of their plea can come home to us only if we are willing to hear and feel their poetry. The following outline is suggested on the assumption that every class member will have read this chapter before class and that most of the session may be used for this study.

1. Spend a few minutes as a group experimenting with some loaded words—words that have many shades of meaning. Have each member of the group write down quickly his first “image” on hearing some of these loaded words, such as home, fear, trust, defeat, and then compare results. Then move to terms that we more often find in the language of faith, such as save, serve, justice. Discuss where we have encountered these realities.
2. Spend 30 minutes in small workshop groups discovering what commentaries say about the critical questions of Ezekiel 18:30–32. Where, when, and to whom were these words written? What was intended by them?
3. Spend 15 minutes individually or in teams in consulting dictionaries, wordbooks, and concordances on the loaded words such as new, live, and turn. Try to catch the peculiar meanings these words have in biblical faith (see chapter 5 for guidance).
4. In the total group discuss what these poetic words meant to the original speaker and his listeners. To express such meanings you may want to try finger painting, coat-hanger bending, or paper tearing, and discuss the various creations. Often the deepest meanings of such terms cannot be verbalized.

5. Now let the whole group think through and discuss where the deep thrust of this passage is and especially where its loaded terms touch our own experience. How does this contact with the biblical experience give us new understanding and invite us to face the “over-and-above” meanings? Where in our experience might we make a decision not to die, as the writer demands?

### **Continued Exploration**

For other passages that are loaded with more of the “over-and-above” quality than we usually recognize, examine 1 Corinthians 13:4–7. What really is meant by this much-used word love? Or see Mark 11:20–26 in a very strange narrative. What about the words faith, doubt, believe, and prayer? Is there something in these terms that lies deeper than their obvious meanings? Discuss together whatever “over-and-above” qualities could matter in your own lives.

What are some of the conditions and situations that Jeremiah might write about if he were living in the United States today?

Is there a poetry of silence that can be eloquent?

Who are your favorite poets? About what subjects or experiences do they write? Would what they write be pertinent in any age?

Most people have a difficult time understanding good poetry. Why? How would you help another to understand poetry?

What experiences and feelings in your life can you understand better as a result of studying the Bible as poetry?

## 8

# The Struggle for Maturity

We began our study wondering why so many people make such a fuss about an old book. By now we have arrived at the point of knowing that it is not just an old book, but a body of literature about the deep, important things of life. Studying the Bible can be an honest seeking for maturity. There are many facets to maturity, but one of them is surely the discovery of who we are, to whom we belong, and what our life is about. These are the very things with which the Bible is most concerned, and this is a primary reason for taking the Bible seriously. In it we can find resources to aid us in the struggle to become mature persons in a responsible community. This is why the Bible stays relevant all our lives. We never complete our struggle for maturity.

There are many ways to study the Bible. We have suggested only a few. But none of these approaches should be considered the one and only way to study the Bible. Basically, Bible study is the process by which persons come to learn about themselves in an honest community in relation to God and his purposes. Any method that does not help us do this should be abandoned. More important than any method is the fact of being engaged with the Bible in a creative way in order that we may become more mature persons and live lives that will bring joy to us and glory to God.

When a person studies the Bible honestly and persistently over a period of time, the result most likely will be a changed life. This does not necessarily mean sudden radical changes, though it may. It does not mean that he will have a sudden overwhelming reli-

gious experience; more probably his attitudes and goals and values will gradually change and he will come to a new understanding of himself.

## **Proper Expectations**

If Bible study is to be meaningful we must learn to come to the Bible with the right kinds of questions. Many persons are disappointed in the Bible or are misled by it because they come with the wrong kinds of questions. As a result they either do not get answers or they squeeze answers from the Bible that are not really legitimate. The Bible is not an answer book for all our problems and confusions. There is little specific help in the Bible for one who wants to know how late to stay out on a date or whether it is all right to pet. Nor will the Bible direct our parents in decisions about how to invest their money or which home to buy or which doctor to call in an emergency. The Bible will not tell our public leaders what to do about unemployment or automation or nuclear power or the space race.

But there are important questions to which the Bible offers helpful, honest answers. These are questions about the purpose of life, about the value system by which we live, about the worth of human personality, about the purpose of human history, and about the responsibility we have for the good of our fellows. Questions of value and meaning and purpose find serious consideration in the Bible when we have ears to hear. But most often we want specific answers to urgent questions.

One cannot make the Bible work that way. It will not often speak to such specific questions. But continued and honest study of the Bible in facing the broad questions of value and meaning and purpose will equip us to be the kind of persons who can answer our own questions. Let us take an example we have used before. On a date, every teenager knows that when he gets involved in necking he can't run to the phone and ask Mom how far he should go. But, having lived and talked with his parents for years, he undoubtedly will have absorbed some of their concern for sincerity and responsibility in personal relationships, and he will have thought through in a general way the problems and risks that are involved in petting; thus he will have acquired enough maturity and understanding to control his emotions and to act wisely.

So with our study of the Bible. After we have studied and lived faithfully with the Bible we will have become persons with the kind of commitments and values that in a given situation enable us to decide and to act according to the highest insights of the Bible without needing to leaf through the Bible for a specific verse to justify our action. The specific critical decisions that we have to make are our own and we cannot expect anyone else to make them for us.

### **Courage in Not Finding Out**

Even when we have learned to ask the right questions of the Bible we will not always find the answers. This is not because the Bible writers wanted to keep the truth from us, nor because we are too stupid to hear the answers that are given, but because the really deep questions about value and meaning and purpose often have no clear answers.

Thus, for example, in a slum situation where schools are bad and education is inferior, a mother of seven children must ask questions about the meaning of life. She must ask whether it really makes any sense to try to nurture children in such a hopeless situation from which there seems no way out. When she asks if it is all worth the effort, she is asking the kind of question about which the Bible is really concerned, but the question can hardly be answered. No one dares to say to her, "Give up, it's not worth it." And no one would be naïve enough to say, "Things are not really so bad, keep at it." There is no clear answer, and she will need the courage and faith to struggle along without having the question answered.

When we cannot find answers in the Bible we may be tempted to blame the Bible writers for their ignorance; but life has areas of mystery, and mystery is different in quality from ignorance. Ignorance we can usually dispel by study and education. Mystery we must honor as a place where God meets us in his hidden glory. We may never be able to penetrate that mystery.

Study of the Bible is important for the mature person who knows that the questions must be asked and at the same time knows that we must go on living even when they have not been answered. And they are questions each of us must face. They appear in many forms, but always they deal with worth, purpose, responsibility, and healing. Out of these things we derive strength to live, and about these the Bible will speak when we let it.

## Being on the Other End

But we misunderstand the Bible if we think that we study it simply by putting questions to it and waiting for answers as though it were a computer. When we take the Bible seriously we discover that we do not simply ask questions of the Bible. We find that the Bible puts questions to us—questions we cannot avoid because we believe that this Book in some way is the word of God and therefore that God himself is asking them. Our well-being, our wholeness of person, depends on our hearing these questions and trying to answer them.

There are, of course, obvious questions which occur in the Bible in that form and are easily recognized:

“God called to man and said to him ‘Where are you?’ ” (Genesis 3:9) God is always asking us where we are and what we are doing with our lives.

“‘But will God indeed dwell on the earth?’ ” (1 Kings 8:27) Do we really think we can confine this great God to our little places for him? Can God be domesticated?

“‘But who do you say that I am?’ ” (Matthew 16:15) He asks us what we make of him and how we understand him. What do we really make of Jesus Christ in our lives?

Questions of this kind are enough to change our lives if we take them seriously. But there are less obvious questions that must be faced, and they are on almost every page of the Bible, if we can only discern them. Thus, for example, in our early study we looked at the story of Joseph. In this story questions jump out at us. What is a man to do when his life is filled with ups and downs? Is it meaningful to suffer for the sake of one's family? How much responsibility should one take for the sake of his society? Is there really a God who brings good out of evil?

And when one faces these questions, he is driven to other questions about his own life. Am I that kind of person? Do *I* live in that kind of world? Do *I* trust in that kind of God? What *keeps* me from trusting him? The questions can go on and on, but in struggling with them we reach new dimensions of self-understanding that may indeed change our lives.

It is one thing to put questions to the Bible and hope for answers. It is quite another to have to answer for one's whole life before God and the “memory of our people.” But if we intend to be-

long, if we understand our lives in terms of God and this people, then we must answer, as honestly and fully as we can. And as we do, we move toward maturity of the kind that only the Christian can know. (Ephesians 4:13)

## **Saying "Yes" with Our Whole Lives**

Some of the deepest questions put to us by the Bible do not require a verbal answer. A quick verbal answer is often too easy, often superficial, and even false. When we give answers to the basic questions of life that grow out of the Bible, we are called to answer not with our lips but with our whole lives. Our entire person may answer "yes" to the purpose of God for us. This is the real mark of Christian maturity, that our whole living of life—our work and play and study, our relations to all kinds of persons, our making of decisions, facing crises, resisting temptations—all this may be a decision to accept God's loving, responsible purpose for us.

The church has long been filled with persons who answered the questions too quickly and too easily and never really meant it. So they answered and then went on with business as usual. But serious Bible study calls for a lifetime of saying "yes" to God, of saying "yes" in many different ways in response to many different situations and occasions. This is why Bible study must continue. The questions are always put in new ways as we grow older, and we must give answers in new ways.

Confirmation then is not a once-for-all "yes" to God, but it is a decisive step in a whole career of saying "yes" to God with every part of our lives. Conversation with the Bible can be a continuation and maturation of the "yes" we speak to God in confirmation.

## **Continued Exploration**

What questions would you put to the Bible if you could ask any questions you wish?

What questions have been put to you in this course of study?

What major questions remain unanswered for you?

In what ways have you said "yes" in these weeks?

What connections do you see between maturity and Bible study?

What has Bible study to do with the church?



## Study Resources

(Those marked with asterisk (\*) are suggested for use in this course of study.)

### 1. General Guides for Study:

\* *Understanding the Old Testament* by Bernhard W. Anderson. Prentice-Hall, Inc., Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey, 1957. 2nd. ed., 1966. Interweaves the literary, archaeological, and theological backgrounds of Israel's history and traces its faith from Abraham to the period just before Christ. A basic resource book in the United Church Curriculum.

*A Light to the Nations: An introduction to the Old Testament* by Norman K. Gottwald. Harper & Brothers, New York, 1959.

\* *Understanding the New Testament* by Howard C. Kee, Franklin W. Young, and Karlfried Froehlich. Prentice-Hall, Inc., Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey, 1957. 2nd. ed., 1965. A fascinating presentation of the origins of the New Testament—the historical and literary surroundings in which it was formed. In vivid nontechnical style the book reconstructs the early Christian community and studies it.

### 2. Commentaries:

\* *The Interpreter's Bible*, 12 volumes, George A. Buttrick *et al.*, eds. Abingdon Press, Nashville, 1952–1957. The most popular, up-to-date, and generally reliable commentary available. Critical introductions on every book of the Bible, with helpful exegesis of the complete text.

\* *The Layman's Bible Commentary*, 25 volumes. John Knox Press, Richmond, 1959–1964. Designed specifically for the lay student of the Bible. Concise and without technical terms.

*Torch Bible Commentaries*, 35 volumes. Student Christian Movement Press Ltd., London, 1948–1964. Concise introductions and very brief, non-technical commentaries on each book of the Bible.

\* *Peake's Commentary on the Bible* by M. Black and H. H. Rowley. Rev. ed. Thomas Nelson & Sons, New York, 1962. The most up-to-date of one-volume commentaries. Much useful information, but somewhat technical for beginners.

### 3. Bible Dictionaries:

\* *The Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible*, 4 volumes, ed. by George A. Buttrick. Abingdon Press, Nashville, 1962. This illustrated dictionary identifies, explains, or defines every person named in the Bible or Apocrypha, every plant, animal, mineral, every biblical doctrine and theological concept. Full-length articles on each book of the Bible, the Apocrypha and other extra-canonical books, the Dead Sea Scrolls and the Gnostic Manuscripts, and on the great theological concepts of the Bible. Now the most authoritative, up-to-date, and comprehensive Bible dictionary available.

*The Westminster Dictionary of the Bible* by John D. Davis. Revised

by Henry S. Gehman. Westminster Press, Philadelphia, 1944. An accurate and authoritative dictionary written in clear nontechnical language.

*Dictionary of the Bible*, ed. by James Hastings, rev. ed. by F. C. Grant and H. H. Rowley. Charles Scribner's Sons, New York, 1963. This revised one-volume edition of Dr. Hastings' famous work is based on the Revised Standard Version, but has cross-references from the King James and Revised versions. The most widely used one-volume Bible dictionary available in the English language.

*Harper's Bible Dictionary* by Madeleine S. and J. Lane Miller. 6th. ed. Harper & Brothers, New York, 1959. Covers archaeology, geography, chronology, and the other fields of contemporary biblical investigation. Contains hundreds of illustrations and Bible maps. Concise and authoritative.

#### 4. Bible Word Books:

\* *A Theological Word Book of the Bible* by Alan Richardson. The Macmillan Company, New York, 1950. Contains 230 helpful articles that bring the resources of modern scholarship to bear on the meaning of the key words of the Bible.

*A New Testament Word Book* by William Barclay. Harper & Brothers, New York, 1957.

*More New Testament Words* by William Barclay. Harper & Brothers, New York, 1958.

#### 5. Concordances:

\* *Analytical Concordance to the Bible* by Robert Young. Funk & Wagnalls Company, New York. Useful because both Hebrew and Greek roots of each word are given, along with definitions in English. Based on the King James Version.

*Cruden's Complete Concordance* by Alexander Cruden, ed. by A. D. Adams et al. Holt, Rinehart & Winston, Inc., New York, 1949. Includes references to both the King James Version and the American Revised Version.

*Nelson's Complete Concordance of the Revised Standard Version Bible*. Thomas Nelson & Sons, New York, 1957. Over 2,000 pages.

*Concise Concordance to the Revised Standard Version of the Holy Bible*. Thomas Nelson & Sons, New York, 1959. Small but very useful.

*Harper's Topical Concordance*, compiled by Charles R. Joy. Harper & Brothers, New York, 1940. Revised, enlarged, and up-to-date edition, equally usable with King James and Revised Standard versions.

#### 6. Bible Translations:

\* *The New Testament in Modern English*, tr. by J. B. Phillips. The Macmillan Company, New York, 1958. A vigorous presentation of the

New Testament message in the language of everyday modern usage, showing how strikingly relevant the New Testament is to the twentieth century.

*The Oxford Annotated Bible*, Revised Standard Version. Oxford University Press, 1962. A concise and up-to-date book that provides in a single volume explanations that clarify or expand the meaning of thousands of obscure and difficult passages in the Bible.

\* *The New English Bible*. Oxford University Press and Cambridge University Press, New York, 1961. So far only the New Testament is available. Beautiful and accurate English.

\* *The Bible: A New Translation* by James Moffatt. Harper & Brothers, New York, 1935. A vigorous and intelligent translation by a great Bible scholar.

\* *The Bible: An American Translation* by J. M. P. Smith and Edgar J. Goodspeed. The University of Chicago Press, Chicago, 1935. A modern translation that is accurate and readable.

\* *The Old Testament*, tr. by Ronald Knox. Sheed & Ward, Inc., New York, 1948. An accurate and readable modern translation by a perceptive and intelligent Roman Catholic.

*The New Testament Octapla*, ed. by Luther A. Weigle. Thomas Nelson & Sons, New York, 1962. Combines the texts of eight English translations—Tyndale's, the Great Bible, the Geneva Bible, the Bishop's Bible, the Rheims, and the King James, American Standard, and Revised Standard versions.

## 7. Maps and Atlases:

*The Westminster Historical Atlas to the Bible*, ed. by G. Ernest Wright and Floyd V. Filson. Rev. ed. Westminster Press, Philadelphia, 1956. This basic study tool contains 18 pages of maps in full color, many photographs and drawings, index of modern place names, and a wealth of fascinating historical and geographical facts about the Bible lands.

*Oxford Bible Atlas*, Herbert G. May *et al.*, eds. Oxford University Press, New York, 1962. This new Bible atlas features concise articles on the historical geography of the Bible lands and archaeological discoveries that have illuminated biblical history. Forty-eight pages of five-color maps, a 26-page gazetteer, tables of dates, and 73 photographs make this a superb companion to any edition of the Bible.

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